The New Criterion

October 2001

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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The New Criterion *October 2001*

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Notes & Comments: October 2001

America's wake-up call

History is strewn with the wrecks of nations which have gained a little progressiveness at the cost of a great deal of hard manliness, and have thus prepared themselves for destruction as soon as the movements of the world gave a chance for it.
—Walter Bagehot, *Physics and Politics*

We suspect that few readers of *The New Criterion* follow The Coup, a popular "hip-hop" group whose expostulations are said to exhibit "a strong anti-capitalist bent." Our readers may therefore have missed the band's web page. Until recently, it featured a picture meant as advance publicity for its forthcoming album "Party Music." In the foreground were shown two members of the group, one of whom smirks as he presses a button on a detonator. In the background was an image of the twin towers at New York's World Trade Center exploding.

That image was removed soon after the twin towers were destroyed by terrorists on September 11. But presumably this "anti-capitalist" band will find other ways of advertising and peddling its new album. After all, anti-capitalist feeling generally stops well short of interfering with personal profit. And even with the image of the twin towers in flames gone, "Party Music" is likely to offer fans of hip-hop plenty to conjure with. There is, for example, the featured number "5 Million Ways to Kill a CEO." Such casual exploitation of violence is business as usual in the pop music world these days. But what does that say about our culture?

On September 11, *The New York Times* ran a long and flattering profile of Bill Ayers, who in the 1970s was a member of the Weather Underground, the radical anti-American group that was responsible for many acts of violence. "I don't regret setting bombs," Ayers says in the story's lead. "I feel we didn't do enough." Well, we wonder how many people were reading those lines when two hijacked airliners screamed into the twin towers, killing some 6,000 civilians and bringing the United States to a momentary stand-still.

We have come to expect moral thuggery from the gutter-world of rap and hip-hop. But *The New York Times*? What does it tell us that our paper of record should run a chirpy profile of this affluent, minor-league terrorist and his wife, Bernardine Dohrn, a fellow member of the Weather Underground in the 1970s who was once on the F.B.I.'s Ten Most Wanted List? Written by Dinitia Smith, a *Times* staffer, the profile is a specimen of contemporary moral imbecility. Smith flirts with the spectacle of transgression even as she maintains a benignly non-judgmental attitude toward these icons of

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violent radicalism. Her profile, timed to coincide with the publication of *Fugitive Days*, Ayers's memoir of his life on the lam, was designed to boost a book that fondly recalls bombing the Pentagon and offers instructions for making bombs. (This was also the point of the friendly page-long interview with Ayers in *The New York Times Magazine* for September 16.) Smith gushingly dilates on Ayers's "ebullient, ingratiating manner," his "love affair with explosives," his and his fellow radicals' efforts to "smash monogamy." She quotes a statement, generally attributed to Ayers, which summarizes the philosophy of the Weather Underground: "Kill all the rich people. Break up their cars and apartments. Bring the revolution home, kill your parents, that's where it's really at."

Ayers equivocates about whether he actually said that. "It's been quoted so many times I'm beginning to think I did," he coyly reports, adding "it was a joke about the distribution of wealth." Some joke. It is approximately as funny as his September 14 letter to the *Times* explaining that, after the World Trade Center attack, his book is really "a condemnation of terrorism in all its forms." Right. It is worth noting that Ayers is not only a newly published author but also a "distinguished professor of education" at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Shouldn't lawmakers in Illinois pause to consider how they are "redistributing" the taxpayers' wealth at their state university?

What is it about higher education that encourages political idiocy? Consider the case of Barbara Foley, a Marxist professor of English at Rutgers University in New Jersey. In the wake of the deadly assaults on New York and Washington, Foley posted a message on the internet for her students. It dealt partly with readings for the class, partly with the terrorist attacks. "[W]e should," Foley wrote, "be aware that, whatever its proximate cause, its ultimate cause is the fascism of u.s. [*sic*] foreign policy over the past many decades."

Foley's pontificating did not end there. She went on to advise her students that "we should be well aware of the ways in which this event will supply the ruling elite with a pretext for massive repression and control. airport surveillance will be, truly, on the tip of that iceberg." (We preserve Foley's avoidance of capitals since it is probably by design: capital letters being a linguistic sign of unwarranted hierarchy, or some such.)

Such behavior by an "on-duty" college professor is completely inappropriate, of course. There is, first of all, the matter of gross insensitivity. What if some of her students had lost a parent, a spouse, a sibling in those attacks? How would they like being told that the cause was the "fascist" foreign policy of the United States? There is also the larger issue of what an English professor is doing using official communications with her class as a soapbox for political proselytizing. Since when did memoranda about readings for a class in American literature become occasions for expatiating on the supposed evils of American foreign policy?

Not that English professors have a monopoly on political pandering. Iraq's Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan suggested that the attacks were "terrorist acts practiced by the American administration" against its own people. John Lahr, theater critic of *The New Yorker*, apparently agrees:

> An acid thought keeps plaguing me. Isn't it odd that on the day—the day—that the Democrats launched their most blistering attack on "the absolute lunacy" of Bush's unproven missile-defence system, his "theological" belief in "rogue nations," that the rogue nation should suddenly become such a terrifying reality. The fact that I could even think such a thought says more to me about the bankruptcy and moral exhaustion of our leaders even in the face of a disaster. In fear, the nation, to my mind, has always proved mean-spirited and violent.

Mark Steyn, who reported Lahr's comments in Canada's *National Post*, put it perfectly when he responded: "No, John. It says

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more about the bankruptcy and moral exhaustion of you: thousands of his fellow citizens die in a spectacular act of war and one of New York's most glittering cultural arbiters idly wonders—in public—if Bush staged it to distract attention from criticism by Democrats."

The horrific events of September 11 have often and accurately been dubbed a "wake-up call" for America. Who can forget the image of that Boeing 767 smashing into the south tower of the World Trade Center in a coruscating bloom of smoke and flame? We hope that that image—and the other heartbreaking images that followed in New York and at the Pentagon—will prove to be a reveille in at least two distinct senses.

First of all, we pray that those premeditated acts of butchery will succeed in rousing America's military and foreign policy from the sentimental torpor it has labored under (with periodic moments of lucidity) since the debacle of Vietnam. President Bush was right to describe the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington as acts of war. They were directed primarily not at physical targets but at a way of life: at American democracy and the freedom and political openness that nourish it. They were part of what Binyamin Netanyahu called "a war to reverse the triumph of the West." Murderous though the attacks of September 11 were—they claimed more American lives than the attack on Pearl Harbor and D-Day combined—we must assume that they were only the opening salvo in a protracted campaign against the West. In recent years, we have tended to conduct foreign policy alternately as a sort of diversity seminar sponsored by the ACLU at some college campus or, more cynically, as an insturment to increase political campaign contributions. We can no longer afford those infantilizing luxuries

Among other things, these latest terrorist attacks demonstrated with cruel vividness that all cultures are not equal. They showed that pledging allegiance to the values of Western democracy ultimately involves fighting against ideas and regimes set on destroying those values. Not only must we seek out and eliminate the individuals responsible for those acts of war, we must also identify the states that aid and abet terrorism and make sure they are rendered incapable of doing so in the future. The commentator Jonathan Rauch was quite right when he observed (*pace* Barbara Foley) that "the cause of terrorism is terrorists." They, and the social and political networks that nurture them, must be eliminated root and branch.

America's wake-up call has sounded in the corridors of the Pentagon and the State Department. It has also sounded in the culture at large. Will it be heeded? It is a clarion calling us not only to wake up but also to grow up. For almost two decades, *The New Criterion* has battled against the rancid pieties of modish multiculturalism. We have sought to expose the moral and aesthetic degradation of popular culture, the political malevolence of efforts to turn intellectual life into an ideological battleground, the adolescent posturings of privileged individuals who pretend that civilization is an impediment to true enlightenment. Some have regarded our efforts with impatience, some with admiration. But the time has come to confront the underlying political and spiritual realities of the so-called culture wars. We can no longer afford to coddle rock groups that preach violence and self-indulgence, journalists who glamourize felons, and professors who seek to poison the minds and hearts of their students. As for the repellent fantasies of cultural spokesmen like John Lahr, it is time they were roused from their phantasmagoric slumbers. Please note: we are not advocating that such messengers of nihilism be censored or persecuted. We are advocating that they be recognized for what they are: decadent enemies of freedom. America can win the war against terrorism. It will not be easy. It will not be quick. But with courage, perseverance, and maturity we will prevail. The unanswered question is whether we are yet ready to grow up.

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The survival of culture: II

The battle of the book: the research library today

by Eric Ormsby

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and France a boisterous debate, traditionally known as the "Battle of the Books," raged for many decades. The issue at stake was one of style: should we accept the "Antients" (to use Jonathan Swift's spelling) as our models and exemplars in matters literary, given their immemorial legacy of acutely expressive prose and verse, or should we rather forge a "Modern" style and manner befitting our own age and its peculiar requirements and contingencies? Charles Perrault in France in the 1695 preface to his *Contes* sided resolutely with the moderns, and this on moral grounds: the ancient fables taught a destructive morality. Interestingly enough, he singled out the pernicious effects of certain misogynistic classical tales on young girls' moral nature and declared: "I maintain that my fables deserve more to be related than most of the ancient tales . . . if one considers them from the moral aspect."

Similar debates took place at other times and in other cultures. In ninth-century Baghdad, to name but one, poets argued strenuously over whether it was better to ape the style of those earlier desert-dwelling bards who had made the original glory of literary Arabic or to forge an idiom and manner reflective of the overly refined and courtly world in which the poets actually lived. The scurrilous wag (and great poet) Abû Nuwâs went so far as to lampoon the early poets and to state that the only thing he himself sought in the ancient ruins was a good stiff drink.

Today, it seems, we are confronted with a new battle of the books. Ours, however, is not between two competing and irreconcilable types of book but between the book itself and its would-be surrogates, whether these latter take the form of CD-ROMs, video disks, digital encryptions, or indeed, formats and media not yet invented or even imagined. It is thus a battle of the book itself, rather than merely of one type of book against another. And in no institution has this battle been waged more confusingly or more protractedly over the last twenty-five years than in that supposed *asylum pacis*, or "haven of peace," the epithet which the great German scholar and library director Adolf von Harnack once gave the research library.

In a certain real sense, of course, this is a phony war. Books and computers work well together and have proved complementary, even symbiotic, on numerous ventures (Is publishing itself even conceivable now without automation?). But each format has come to stand for something in the minds of its adherents: if not a style, then a stance. For the book lover, it is the affection and reverence for tradition coupled with the conviction that the book as a medium is essentially unimprovable. (I should alert the reader that I share this conviction, even though I presided over the implementation of two large automated systems in libraries

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where I was the director.) For the advocate of automation, by contrast, tradition is itself the problem; there are bold and innovative electronic ways of building collections and of running libraries. The computer holds out the promise of resolving many of the old intractable problems: lack of space, deterioration of paper, the cumbersomeness of making bibliographic and intellectual connections using printed sources alone. The zealous computer fanatic sees the book lover as troglodytic; the staunch book lover regards the computer fanatic as barbaric. As you might suspect, both sides are right and both sides are wrong.

In developing his fable about the Library of Babel, Jorge Luis Borges noted that the library, which was a model of the universe, was infinite and unending. So, too, it often seems, are the problems underlying the history of research libraries over the past few decades. In what follows, therefore, I use a broad brush, all the while recognizing that the topics raised could each demand many pages for a full and nuanced treatment.

To understand this period of almost incessant change, two factors must be recognized. First, until quite recently, this has been an era of unprecedented budgetary crisis for libraries (and often for the universities that support them), with crunches and squeezes and freezes and clawbacks—the terminology alone is terrifying—of varying intensity affecting nearly every fiscal year since the affluent 1960s, and accompanied by staggering increases in the prices for both books and periodicals. And second, this has been the period in which, not by coincidence, automation began to be introduced swiftly—often, all too swiftly—into libraries, initially as a cost-saving strategem and then, increasingly, as an alternative to the long-accepted but expensive standard practices and services, such as original cataloging or collection-building by means of professional bibliographers, among other possible examples.

It is not easy to summarize this period dispassionately but all observers would agree, I think, that the effects of both of these factors have been far-reaching, occasionally destructive and quite often traumatic. The trouble with budget cuts is not solely that they restrict growth but also that they open up opportunities for crisis managers, who for the most part have no stake in, or love for, the libraries they administer but grasp crises as opportune moments for self-promotion or the promotion of some not-so-hidden agenda. And the trouble with automation is not that it is itself unsuitable or deleterious to research libraries but that it has furnished an irresistible pretext for sweeping change, often for its own sake rather than for the sake of the libraries or those researchers who depend on them.

The zealous computer fanatic sees the book lover as troglodytic; the staunch book lover regards the computer fanatic as barbaric. As you might suspect, both sides are right and both sides are wrong.

In *The Battle of the Books*, Jonathan Swift could speak, rather disingenuously, of "the publick Peace of Libraries." Whatever mood may reign in libraries, it is fair to say that over the past few decades, peace, public or private, has not been predominant. Rather, a stubborn engagement, with numerous skirmishes, several protracted sieges, and not a few premature cries of victory, has swirled around books and libraries even though the precise issues have often been unclear, even to—perhaps especially to—the participants. In all this, the book has not merely survived but has flourished even as myriad forms of automation, like upstart pretenders to the epistemological throne, have been touted and installed, sometimes with the quite blatant purpose of supplanting the book and all it represents. Millions upon millions of dollars have been expended, hundreds of careers have been

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embroiled (and not a few destroyed), and yet any final resolution remains in doubt. If we can indeed call this a "battle of the books," perhaps it is more of a brawl, a brawl carried out in slow motion and under cover of a rather ferocious gentility (only a seeming paradox in the world of librarianship). In fact, we have more books than ever (though whether libraries can keep up with the flow remains a troubling question), and we have ever more sophisticated, and ever costlier, automated systems, ostensibly to enable us to retrieve the "information" in those books.

In reality, alas, information has become its own *raison d'être* with the book considered, by surprisingly many members of the profession, as little more than a clumsy, outmoded and luxurious obstacle to that quest. Small wonder that in my own thirteen years as a research library director, though I came to know many well-read and cultured directors, I never heard the book referred to at professional meetings, such as the biannual gatherings of the influential Association for Research Libraries, as anything but a kind of parasitic encumbrance, one that ate up space, generated noxious dust, deteriorated in various unseemly ways, and of which there yet never seemed to be enough to satisfy the ravening appetites of both students and faculty.

Formal public expressions of this are of course circumspect. In a statement of the priorities for the year 2000 of the 121 top-ranked American and Canadian libraries that are members of the Association of Research Libraries, we read of the need to "help research libraries and their constituencies move into a transformed and increasingly diverse environment through the development of human resources, programs, and services." Is this some sort of code or just terminal fuzziness? Judging from my own experience I would say that the key phrase is "a transformed and increasingly diverse environment." These weasel words mean almost nothing, to be sure, but to me at least the mélange of smarmy condescension and prissy buzz-words ("transformed," "increasingly diverse") suggests that these prestigious libraries are girding themselves for yet more disruptive change. Note too that the one thing the "constituencies" (those pesky faculty, students, and other researchers) will *not* be offered is larger or better book collections, but only "human resources, services, and programs." No doubt the "human resources" will take the form not of dowdy old librarians but of "cybrarians"—a new and ghastly coinage—which are not some race of alien mutants but librarians with the *libri* removed.

The next ARL priority pretty much gives the game away: "Ensure that research and learning will flourish through the development of advanced networking applications and Internet." This insurance, be it noted, is to be accorded not through the provision of books, journals, documents, microfilm, or even databases and other online resources, but rather through "advanced networking applications and Internet." This claptrap too is code; the sanctimonious phrase "research and learning" is intended to divert attention from the alternatives being recommended. Translated, this means that when your "constituencies" (librarians used to call them "users," so maybe this is an improvement) grumble that you're not purchasing the books and periodicals they need, offer them the smokescreen panacea of "networking." In other words, less misleadingly put: send them anywhere else but here.

At the other extreme of this brawl of the book have been those bug-eyed and splenetic observers of the library scene, such as Nicholson Baker, whose recent onslaught (in his book *The Double Fold*) on conservation practices in research libraries has stirred so much acrimony. One reason, of course, why Baker is viewed quite dimly by the library establishment is that he, or his type, has long been familiar: the aggrieved and expostulating professor who appears one day, frothing with rage, in the librarian's office waving some discarded tome and demanding to know how on earth so *indispensable* a title could have been discarded (or

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"de-accessioned," as librarians coyly put it). There is probably no book, pamphlet, leaflet, magazine, newspaper, comic book, or indeed, printed object of any sort, that does not have some research value, and in this, at least, the raving professor is right. I have known one librarian-collector of ephemera who dutifully amassed hoards of subway ticket stubs, empty shampoo bottles and even designer sunglasses because all of these objects bore print on their surfaces. But libraries are institutions in which a principle of selection should reign, and this for very sound epistemological rather than pragmatic reasons. Selection, when carried out skillfully in a research library, is an art as well as a science, and it is this art, along with the collections it can shape, that we are in danger of losing in the current "battle," if indeed we have not already lost it. Much that Baker complains of is, of course, all too true, but the trouble is that he should have been proclaiming it twenty-five years ago when it could have made a difference and when many librarians themselves might have welcomed such an ally. His fulminations are just too late.

One of the most troubling aspects of our battle of the books as it has been conducted, mostly behind the scenes, in our major university libraries is that there exists so little common ground between proponents of the traditional book with all its offshoots and the self-appointed apostles of a new approach. Swift could declare of his own conflict that "the present Quarrel is so enflamed by the warm Heads of either Faction, and the Pretensions *somewhere or other* so exorbitant, as not to admit the least Overtures of Accommodation." Worse still, few indeed have been those participants in our own battle who have had the courage or the foresight or the plain common sense to proclaim that the conflict is probably moot: indeed, we and our libraries—and by extension, that means our culture, and the survival of culture—require urgently *all* modes of knowledge, for in the end they are complementary, not antithetical. The invention of printing did not obviate the need for manuscripts or indeed for papyrus and palm-leaf scrolls and cuneiform tablets, all of which libraries still collect, or should be collecting.

One of my own frustrations as a library director lay in the difficulty, if not the patent impossibility, of persuading one side or the other that both books and computers were essential. On occasion, this took farcical turns. University administrators routinely cherish the plaintive hope that automation will somehow, in the near future, obviate the need for books, libraries, and traditional library buildings, the costs of which increase exponentially year after year (it is a rule of thumb that book prices rise by a year or more ahead of the Consumer Price Index).

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Researchers and students are, however, usually just as desperate to obtain print materials *in addition to* online resources; those who use the sources, especially in the sciences, often find both print and online formats necessary since they consult them at different times for different purposes; the online version in a lab in the heat of an experiment and the print version for writing up results. In the midst of such troubles, I found myself lunching with a university vice president who had been effectively blocking the construction of a new special library for over two years because, as he put it, "books will be extinct in five years and so, why construct a new building to house them?" Suddenly, between the soup and the main

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course, he lost all patience and exclaimed, "Yes, yes, I know you book lovers all too well! The book is a sexual object for you. Think about it: those creamy white pages you love to spread wide, like a woman's thighs, the textures of the paper, even the smell of a fresh book. . . ! It is classically Freudian! Oh yes, I have you pegged!" The fact that my interlocutor was French-born and still possessed a Chevalieresque accent gave his words incredibly lurid emphasis.

Startled by this outburst, I yet had to admit upon later reflection that he had a point. A book is intensely physical, even sensuous. Reading is not a disincarnate, cerebral activity but a solidly physical process in which we deploy almost all our senses, and no doubt a Freudian pleasure-principle is at work while we read. After all, we are at least subliminally conscious of the weight of the book in our hands, the design and layout of the pages engage our eye, the typeface is pleasing or annoying or diverting, marginalia or underscorings may arrest our attention, we can smell the ink at times and graze the texture of the pages, the binding, the dust jacket with our fingertips. In her memoir *One Writer's Beginnings*, Eudora Welty put it this way: "I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them [books]—with the books themselves, cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself."

When we open an old book, or one we read in childhood, the scent of the past that rises up can bring back whole Proustian realms in its gust. By contrast, nothing could be less sensuous than a computer monitor with that cool filtering glow that emanates from it; even the touch of fingers on the keyboard is abstract compared to the feel of a cover or of pages. I do not write this as a nostalgic paean to the book as such (though I see nothing wrong in that), but I do wonder whether the knowledge gained from books may stick with us longer in part because it comes wreathed in these sensuous associations. In any case, the senses, if not the attention (try to distract a teenager from a computer screen!), seem more fully engaged by a book than by a monitor, however seductively the latter may twitter.

No doubt I am biased, but it strikes me that a covert complicity exists between book and reader that does not obtain between computer and user. Reading a book becomes an experience in one's life in a way that consulting a computer cannot be (or, at least, cannot be yet). The computer is unsurpassable for the transmission of facts, of raw information, as well as for its miraculous indexing properties, but it does not —again, perhaps, does not yet—engage our imaginations and intellects in quite the same way a book does. I believe that this has to do with the serial and sequential nature of a book, its succession of pages in linear alignment, as opposed to the scroll-like nature of the computer screen. There is a reason, after all, why the codex superseded the scroll; there is an affinity between the way in which information is presented in a book and the way in which we learn that has no analogue in the world of automation. As far as libraries are concerned, the most visible effect of this change, of this reversion to the scroll that computers represent, has been the relinquishment of the library card catalog. This too has been the subject of a much-discussed and rather silly essay by Nicholson Baker; however piquant Baker's complaints, he somehow missed the entire point of what the shift from card to online record betokened, for better or for worse.

The modern library, as it developed, especially in North America, over the past one hundred years or so, depended above all upon a precise and rather elaborate classification of human knowledge. The best-known of these systems of classification is probably the Dewey Decimal System, devised by Melvil Dewey around the end of the nineteenth century and which depended upon decimal increments to parcel knowledge by subjects. The system was much hated by school kids (myself among them)

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because it compelled you to use the card catalog, at least until you had a good enough grasp of the classifications to browse. Dewey's system rested upon an ancient conception: knowledge is not only classifiable but hierarchical. Some types of knowledge are more general (the domain of reference books such as encyclopaedias, gazeteers, atlases, etc.) and so occupy the first class. Thence we proceed from the general to the more and more particular along a scale of increasing precision and ever finer distinctions.

The point of all this is to say that in order to employ such a system as the Dewey with the utmost effectiveness, you have to have something of a general, if vague, understanding of a certain taxonomy of knowledge; there is an order between, and within, classifications and a strict logic obtains. Books (except fiction) are ordered by subject, not by author. If a given writer has composed a treatise on geology, it will be in a different classification from his or her slim pamphlet of lyrics. To be sure, this is but one principle of classification; books could be classified by author, as in the old Richardson system, or by other means. From the reader's viewpoint what obviously matters is being able to find the book. And yet, in using Dewey, one is necessarily reminded that a given book falls into one category and not another. Dewey and its analogues are, if you will, vertical principles of arrangement, they are arborescent systems from which sprigs and runners and branches are continually unfurling, at predetermined points along the trunk and nowhere else. The more elaborate certain sub-disciplines become, the more vertiginous the classifications and sub-classifications themselves become with call numbers spiralling into ever longer and unwieldier combinations. (Imagine the difficulty of classifying particle physics or quantum mechanics in a system developed in what was still a Newtonian world!)

Though Dewey, in its various revisions and permutations, is used worldwide and is probably the most successful and practical classification scheme yet devised, with that of the Library of Congress not far behind, nowadays all such systems have been rendered irrelevant and even otiose, at least for the average reader, by the advent of automation. The systems are still in use—

> *For better or worse, true knowledge is* by its very nature *hard to get; indeed, it is not just hard to get but tough, knotty, obdurate, resistant, and even harder to hold on to than to get, and we do no one a favor by pretending otherwise.*

books have to be analyzed and classified and shelved somehow and librarians are inveterate systematizers—but they have been effectively gutted of their epistemological structures. What librarians term "subject access" is no longer crucial in carrying out research in a library and the old, massive, crimson-buckram-bound volumes of the Library of Congress index of subject headings, a concordance of Babel on an infinite Borgesian scale, is now more of a curiosity than anything else. Once it became feasible to conduct Boolean searches or simply to employ keywords, the entire edifice of subject classification and taxonomy began to totter. The old stuffy hierarchical categories have gone the way of the Great Auk, and anyone can now find *something* in the library as long as he has even the dimmest idea of what he is looking for. It would be intolerably elitist, I suppose, to lament this apparent dumbing down of the library. As opposed to the old vertical and hierarchical way of articulating knowledge, the new keyword approach is resolutely horizontal and "egalitarian"; not only can anyone use it, practically anything is connected to everything else. The notion of moving from the general or universal to the particular is made ridiculous. Who needs logic when you can enjoy random access?

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It would be foolish to deny the usefulness of keyword searches and their analogues. At the same time, I have observed over the last two decades that research in libraries, among undergraduate and graduate students, is becoming shallower and shallower. If a title or an author is not instantaneously located in a database or an online catalog, the assumption is made (and is quite hard to shake) that the title or author does not exist. Gone are the days of tedious and often fruitless hours spent toiling through bibliographies and bibliographies of bibliographies for a single nugget of fact. Fair enough, and I will not lament their passing. Nor am I arguing that knowledge should be made difficult to obtain, far from it. But, for better or worse, true knowledge is *by its very nature* hard to get; indeed, it is not just hard to get but tough, knotty, obdurate, resistant, and even harder to hold on to than to get, and we do no one a favor by pretending otherwise. In their tiresome stress on information over the last two decades, librarians have tended to place too great an importance on what should in fact be the beginning of a search for knowledge—the mere fact, the datum—and not an end in itself. A facility in surfing the internet is no substitute for the struggle to understand. If genuine learning were available at the stroke of a keyboard, by now we would all be Leonardos and Einsteins. The computer is good not because it makes learning simpler (it does not). It is good because it is fast and because it enables us to tackle tasks and challenges that are otherwise beyond our computational abilities. It is good because through computers we can address the incredible complexity of problems that before we could not even have approached. And in libraries the computer is especially good because it permits almost instantaneous connections to be made between an infinitude of possible subjects. It articulates what would otherwise be Ovid's *rudis indigestaque moles*, a "rough disorderly lump" of chaotic data.

This seemingly slight shift in the way we now seek for information in libraries—briskly and rapidly with apparently infinite "connectivity," as opposed to the old, laborious drudgery of toiling through card-files and reference shelves—has itself brought consequences, both good and bad, in its train and has affected not only the way in which research libraries function but also the very profession of librarian. "Information technicians" and re-tooled reference librarians may have thrived but at least two once-essential disciplines, that of cataloger and that of bibliographer, have been weakened, if not rendered obsolete. This has been one inconspicuous but destructive side effect of automation.

The bibliographer selects books; the cataloger puts them in logical and retrievable order. This sounds simple but is not. Incidentally, of all library specializations, these two are probably the most ancient, dating back to Ur of the Chaldees, if not beyond. Of course, catalogers are invariably (and often rightly) lampooned as fussbudgets and hairsplitters of the most exasperating sort, but then it is their nobly picayune craft to discern ever finer and more accurate footholds along the slippery ladder of classification. And cataloging, if not much honored today, can number among its distinguished practitioners many illustrious names, including the fourth-century B.C. poet and scholar Callimachus whose fabled *Pinakes* (literally "tablets") brought order to the immense holdings of the great library at Alexandria. In more recent times, Leibniz, Lessing, and Strindberg, as well as Philip Larkin (and Mao Zedong!), to name but these, served as librarians and devoted themselves to the creation of catalogs; and think of the prestige of lists and inventories in the works of Jorge Luis Borges, another librarian by profession. (To be sure, it is reported that Callimachus chafed at his post and was perhaps bitter because Ptolemy II never named him director; and Lessing quit the profession in disgust because he was sick and tired, he said, of acting both as the watchdog which guards the hay it cannot eat as well as the stable boy who must provide the cows with fodder on demand.)

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As for the bibliographer, in bygone days most often a scholar-librarian with academic credentials the equal of any professor, he or she has been rechristened the "collection development" librarian or "subject specialist" and is expected to "network" and elaborate ever goofier and more unworkable schemes of "resource sharing." Most meretricious of these, in the turbulent quarter-century just past, was surely the ill-fated "Conspectus," aggressively promoted for years, over the objections of many bibliographers, by both the Research Libraries Group and the Association of Research Libraries. The Conspectus was a cockamamie project by which libraries graded their own research collections, on a scale of one to five, for the purpose of facilitating a purely mythical "shared access"; since the Conspectus inevitably entailed highly subjective and not disinterested self-assessments, it finally collapsed under its own absurdity, but not before having frittered away millions of dollars that might have been spent on enlarging and improving the very collections libraries intended to share. (One flaw in the process was illustrated for me by an exchange with a colleague at the New York Public Library who after having read my ranking of Princeton's Persian holdings declared: "Since Princeton is so good in Persian, we can stop collecting it.")

Forgotten in all these grandiose (and hugely wasteful) sideshows is the fact that the truly wonderful and incomparable American collections, those, say, at Harvard's Widener Library or the New York Public Library or at Yale, Toronto, Indiana, Berkeley, Chicago, Princeton, and on and on, were in fact formed by rampant and often highly individualistic curators and bibliographers who were as much swashbuckling buccaneers in the book business as men and women of learning and scholarly shrewdness. (Their prototype, if not their patron saint, is J. P. Morgan whose bibliographic acumen coupled with business ruthlessness created one of the glories of the world of libraries.) It goes without saying, of course, that few library administrators look with fondness on such potentially maverick staff members. Enter the computer. By holding out the rosy but specious possibility of "shared access," automation also offered a marvelous way of eliminating or "phasing out" such professionals under the snappy banner of "cost effectiveness."

Again it is not nostalgia that prompts me to lament the decline of the bibliographer and the original cataloger in research libraries. Both disciplines are as much needed now as ever before. Why? The original cataloger (that is, the cataloger who does not draw on the cataloging information provided by the Library of Congress or other libraries) works with rare, unusual, often esoteric material, e.g., Rabbinic commentaries on the Talmud with all their numerous super-commentaries, glosses and super-glosses, marginalia and excurses, etc. To catalog books of this sort may require hours or even days; all the authors, many of them obscure, must be traced and the authoritative versions of their names established, the relation of one commentary to a text or a gloss to a commentary must be teased out and elaborated, and so forth. But the result is a minute, almost microtomic dissection of a work and its intellectual and physical history that is of incalculable help to scholars. Naturally, such a specialty is both time-consuming and costly, and yet, is not this, and exactly this, what a research library should be providing? Who else will do this? True, the so-called "brief cataloging" that is now in favor does at least give researchers some grasp on complex collections, but it cannot be an adequate substitute for the full analysis and description intricate items demand.

As for the bibliographer, he not only scouts out and orders books, if he is any good, he also has a comprehensive grasp of the collection. He knows its lacunae; he has a long and detailed list of desiderata; he works to anticipate shifts in a scholarly field and to provide for them; above all, he strives to form a collection that is at once internally consistent and articulated: what may to the casual glance appear whimsical

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or superfluous will yet have its intrinsic place within the collection, and for good reason. Unlike the cataloger's work, however, that of the bibliographer is not easily quantified. Libraries must accept with a certain degree of trust that over time a good bibliographer will succeed in creating a rich and deep collection, much as universities trust that the professors to whom they grant tenure will eventually produce work of substance and significance. Such intangible covenants count for little in the library of today, and more's the pity.

Furthermore, not only have many of the most distinguished American bibliographers and curators literally been hounded out of their positions (yes, at the same Harvards, Princetons, and Yales, whose collections they toiled to build), but the acquisition of books and journals has been widely relegated to automated "approval plans." Under such plans, believe it or not, it is the bookdealers themselves who select and often catalog the very books which they sell to libraries. Multinational bookdealers now routinely create "collection profiles" for research libraries and then proceed to ship books as they, the bookdealers, see fit.

A facility in surfing the internet is no substitute for the struggle to understand. If genuine learning were available at the stroke of a keyboard, by now we would all be Leonardos and Einsteins.

Libraries have the right to return unwanted books but rarely do; it is simply too much bother. Despite the obvious risk of conflict of interest, these plans are not all bad since certain imprints, such as titles from university presses, are almost invariably acquired by libraries; why waste the time of a highly paid bibliographer on such routine purchases? And yet, the titles which fall through the cracks of the plans can only be retrieved by those very specialists who are now more and more being replaced by rank-and-file librarians. If this is bad enough in the realm of English-language publishing, imagine how it affects foreign and special collections for which subject expertise is indispensable. And the damage is usually irreparable; all the titles the library should have been acquiring when it was buying blindly quickly go out-of-print and become unobtainable; the special collection is diminished, usually forever.

Needless to say, this does not form any part of the rosy view of many university officials or library directors, most of whom yodel from their particular fence posts the latest eudemonistic cock-cry of yet another false dawn. The administrators have been more to blame than rank-and-file librarians, most of whom are committed to an ideal of service, to provide whatever readers need. But library "managers" have almost universally seized upon, and pushed, automation as a magical cost-saving expedient.

In one sense, this is understandable. Over the past twenty-five years, book and journal prices have soared to previously unimagined levels. I have my own bench-mark for the surge in book prices: in 1971, almost overnight, the price of E. G. Browne's *Literary History of Persia*—published by Cambridge University Press and for over fifty years around $15 a volume—abruptly quadrupled and made havoc of my meager graduate student book budget. But even if we look at the very recent past, we can see the increases that have devastated acquisitions budgets. A law book which in 1984 cost $44, cost $82 in 1998; a book on literature cost an average of $24 in 1984, but $44 in 1998. (I should point out that there has been some abatement of book prices in the last two years but it is probably too soon to know whether this trend will continue.)

And journal prices, especially for scientific periodicals, have risen to truly obscene levels. A chemistry journal which in 1984 averaged $228.90 per year (a hefty enough price, one would have thought!) rose to

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$1,302.00 in the year 2000; a journal in mathematics which cost $107.00 annually in 1984 had quintupled to cost $517.00 in 2000. (In Europe the situation became even worse: the average German chemistry journal, for example, experienced a six-fold increase for the same period.) The history of scientific journal pricing and its horrendous rise over the last twenty years deserves discussion in its own right. Suffice it to say here that one of the chief pioneers of punitive price increases in academic journals—a particularly cruel and absurd cycle since publishers effectively sell back to university libraries at exorbitant prices the research which their own professors have produced—was none other than the late, unlamented Robert Maxwell, the self-styled "bouncing Czech." His progeny, particularly in England and Holland, continue to thrive at the expense of libraries.

Beginning in the 1970s, such constraints forced library directors and their bosses to cast about desperately for budgetary relief. The computer seemed the ideal answer. (It did not immediately become apparent that computers were, if anything, even costlier in the long term than books and journals.) But the largest irony of our own Battle of the Book is not that certain forceful advocates preferred computers to books for intrinsic reasons—in truth, they could care less—but that with the cynicism of panic, they latched on to that medium, whatever it might be, which looked cheapest, glitziest, and most "cost effective." If the book had been shown to be more cost-effective than the computer—with hindsight a not untenable position!—such administrators would have been baying for more books and journals. As it was, opportunists soon abounded on all campuses, bringing in their wakes not only blatant hucksterism—of the sort we thought had gone out with the snake-oil salesmen of the previous century—but also all varieties of new, and not-so-new, "philosophies of scientific management" and strategic planning. With the advent of the computer, and its ability to provide minute statistical data on operations, came the hard-headed, clear-eyed, unsentimental, bottom-line purveyors of the MBA world-view, and universities—and their libraries—have not been the same since. Gentlemanly library directors (and they were all men), accustomed to submitting elegantly drafted and wryly understated annual reports, were now being asked to draw up "business plans" for their operations. Efficiency experts, systems analysts, and high-priced consultants were not far behind. In all this, perhaps the greatest harm occurred because the research library was simplistically likened to any other large and complex organization when in fact its distinctive operations, requirements, and, yes, institutional culture—in short, all those factors that had made our great libraries great—were utterly at variance with those of a factory or a corporation.

Many librarians accepted the changes with relief, others were dismayed. With the advantage of two decades of hindsight, one can say that the dismay was perhaps not exaggerated. Of course, libraries have been unusually resistant to change, and with justice: an institution and a profession whose sacred duty it has always been to safeguard and make available the records of our past should be conservative, indeed, should be exceedingly cautious, about change. Even so innocuous an innovation as microfiche or microfilm (*pace* Baker), as well as the unprecedented position of "microfilm librarian" ("fiche-wives," as my colleague Orest Pelech of the Duke University Library promptly dubbed them), originally seemed alarming to librarians who feared, without justification, as it turned out, that this new format would replace the book. My own first supervisor and mentor in a research library harbored such anxieties. An immensely learned scholar and bibliophile, he once led me on an excursion through the darkest and most remote regions of the stacks. As I followed in his wake, I noticed that he was mumbling something indistinct but fervent. As I came closer, I saw that he was stroking the spines of the shelved books, and I heard him muttering, "I will

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never let them turn you into microfilm, my darlings!"

Of course, there is no question of a "return to the book" or any other such quasi-Luddite approach. Not only would that be ill-conceived, it would also be superfluous, for the book is thriving as perhaps never before. (According to *The Bowker Annual*, that bible of the library profession, some 100,405 titles were published in 1999 in the United States alone. And on the authority of Dr. Knud Dorn, of the firm of Otto Harrassowitz Buchhandlung in Wiesbaden, I am told that book-publishing *in English* has increased enormously in recent years in Europe, probably because of the EU.) This is not parallel to, or in spite of, advances in automation but because of it, for printing technology has been revolutionized like everything else and the robust state of publishing, at least in terms of production, owes much to automation.

At best the computer and the book are symbiotic. What the computer does well—sorting, indexing, linking, retrieving, etc.—no book can equal but what the book can do—proffer knowledge as a vital experience—computers mimic only very imperfectly. Among many possible examples, let me give two which represent for me the opportunities computers offer to research libraries; one is drawn from my own field of research, the other from my experience as a library consultant.

In Islamic intellectual history, my particular discipline, manuscripts form a core around which entire subsidiary literatures have developed; usually these consist (as in the Rabbinic examples I noted above) of school texts with their ancillary commentaries and glosses, but they may also contain counter-commentaries or even wholly original treatises inspired by a work. In short, a given text may have spawned dozens or even hundreds of subsidiary texts which themselves often span centuries; an author who wrote in the twelfth century may find a glossator today in the madrasahs of Qum or Fez. To amass and compile all of these texts in printed or handwritten or microfilmed form is a daunting job and to collate them is even harder. But through such devices as hypertext, it should be possible not only to convert such writings to electronic form but to index them, so that at the touch of a finger, all the relevant explications on a given theme or problem, from any century whatever, could be summoned to the computer screen. This is in fact happening; the Qur'ân is available on CD-ROM together with two of its standard commentaries. Rather than rummaging through several densely printed volumes, one now can call up a definition or an explanation instantaneously. What is possible for Islamic texts is possible for those in other fields: the creation of a stratified palimpsest of related writings which are mutually transparent. Imagine such a simultaneous array of the different manuscripts of *Ulysses* or *King Lear*.

For the second example, when I worked as a consultant in Morocco, I found that the quickest and best way of building new library collections from scratch was to acquire materials in an online format. Automation has in effect made it possible for Third World institutions to replicate the laboriously assembled collections of great Western libraries, and by this I mean not only their catalogs but much of their holdings as well. Newspaper files, government documents, scientific databases, huge electronically indexed collections of poetry, fiction, and history in several languages are available and more or less affordable. Here the approval plans of various bookdealers, used as a cost-cutting expedient in the West, proved indispensable for the acquisition of printed books and journals. Such "instant" libraries are springing up in the wealthier countries of the Arab world. Of course, they lack the depth of the rich old collections but at least they have a viable foundation on which to build. Moreover, many such collections are available gratis. More and more libraries are offering the full texts of rare and unusual resources. At McGill University Library, for example, it is now child's play to access and download special collec-

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tions as disparate as those on the North West fur trade or the history of the treatment of tuberculosis.

Research libraries in their inherent conservatism have always striven for balance and it seems to me that in these, and other ventures, a new equipoise is taking shape. Both the Antients and the Moderns represent extremes and extremes are antithetical both to libraries and to librarians, who have a fine-grained instinct for equilibrium. It behooves librarians, who are the guardians of collective memory, to look back into their own history for exemplars.

As one example, almost a century ago, in 1904, a figure emerged in the world of librarianship who is now forgotten but whose practice and thinking, in my own opinion, provide pointers for the future. Adolf von Harnack was the keeper of the Royal Library in Berlin from 1904 to 1921 and a renowned historian of early Christianity. Like our own two most recent Librarians of Congress, von Harnack came to his director's post not from the ranks of librarians but from the professoriate (and was heartily resented, at least at first, by the profession, as were both Daniel Boorstin and James Billington). This is worth mentioning because von Harnack administered the Royal Library with a scholar's eye; from long training and practice, he knew exactly what a great research collection and its services should be, and he set out to create them. To this end, he not only expanded and improved the holdings of the library but refined and enhanced the positions of the librarians who were responsible for its continuance. As it happens, von Harnack wrote frequently and well on his new position and its entailments. During his fifteen years in the directorship his view of scholarly collections evolved and became quite subtle, particularly so when juxtaposed to our present "approval plan" approach. Here is how von Harnack enunciated his guiding principle of selection in his 1911 work *Aus Wissenschaft und Leben*:

> Only what is used or at least has a prospect of use should be conserved. The librarian's task in large libraries has become for this reason much more difficult, but also much more significant. The superfluous is always harmful. This is true for large libraries as well. On the other hand, however, it is true to say that even the least significant item is valuable as a mass phenomenon.

As a consequence of this principle and its inherent tension—there is no facile rule or formula—von Harnack argued that the librarian must resist simplistic solutions. When the Director of the University Library in Graz, one Ferdinand Eichler, argued that libraries should concentrate on acquiring only "the best" books, von Harnack argued, with considerable élan, that this was nonsense. The purpose of a research collection, he countered, was not to offer the best or the right ideas, whatever those might be, but all those writings, right or wrong, wise or stupid, that bear on a given subject. The formation of research collections will always therefore be something of an art, in which scholarship, experience, and sheer intuition play essential roles. Von Harnack's conception of the library is at once utopian and down to earth. In a 1923 article he wrote:

> From the time of Leibniz until the end of the 18th century, there existed in the domain of science, literary culture and social life a single educated type and a "private company" (*société anonyme*), to which the most varied spirits belonged. It encompassed Bossuet as well as d'Alembert, Leibniz as well as Kant, Newton as well as Voltaire—all those, indeed, who understood how to present their insights and points of view with wit and style; who knew how to listen to an opponent and to present him with a well-founded response from their own position. This "company" no longer exists, but it does survive in libraries and must continue to survive there. An eclecticism open to all sides must reign there, as it did in the period of the Enlightenment.

Quaint as such a vision may sound, I believe that it remains valid. A research

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library must be as capacious as is possible but it must become so by enlightened and balanced principles of selection. Today surely this implies the fullest deployment of all means at our disposal; in other words, not this format or medium as opposed to that, but *all* pertinent materials, whether they be found on the printed page or in digital form or on bamboo scrolls and cylinder seals. In a fascination with the means, librarians have lately tended to ignore and neglect the ends. But the purpose of a library is not to cut costs or to showcase new gadgetry or to serve as a mausoleum for books fallen into desuetude; rather, it is to make possible that instant of insight when all the facts come together in the shape of new knowledge. It has always struck me as paradoxical that so many tons of concrete, so many miles of shelves and wires and circuitry as even a modest library contains, are required to prompt that most evanescent of human experiences which a new understanding entails. The poet Paul Claudel wrote that for the flight of a single butterfly, "the entire sky is necessary," and so it is as well, I think, in the empyrean of knowledge.

As the motto for the Royal Library, von Harnack took the Latin tag *Biblioteca docet*, "the library teaches." By this he meant not that the library staff offer evening classes but that the library itself make a genuine experience of knowledge continually possible; as a historian he knew that past, present, and future are not merely sequentially linked but interlaced by myriad crisscrossing strands.

What strand in all this belongs properly to the librarian? For von Harnack—and I think that he was right, however archaic his vision may appear—it is still the book itself:

> the literary document as such, as the bearer of literature and science, the book with its general and yet highly particular natural history from inception to binding, the book with its provenance and distribution, the book as an object to be collected, because one book is no book (*ein Buch ist kein Buch*).

Librarianship, when it is "vivified by love of books, is the sum total of knowledge about the library and the book in themselves (*an sich*)." All of von Harnack's musings on libraries are tinged with his own religious sentiment. For this reason he can go so far as to term the librarian a "minister of written and printed words" (*minister verbi scripti et impressi*). And if it is indeed the word, whether it appear on a printed page or a computer screen, that is important, this definition still holds good.

In *The Battle of the Books*, Jonathan Swift indulged the fancy that each book somehow preserved the fighting spirit of its author and that libraries were really cemeteries haunted by the spirits of authors who continued to do battle and oust each other:

> So, we may say, a restless Spirit haunts every Book, till Dust or Worms have seized upon it; which to some, may happen in a few Days, but to others, later; And therefore, Books of Controversy, being of all others, haunted by the most disorderly Spirits, have always been confined in a separate Lodge from the rest; and for fear of mutual violence against each other, it was thought Prudent by our Ancestors, to bind them to the Peace with strong Iron Chains.

Perhaps, undetected by our grosser senses, some such bellicose and divisive spirits hover over our computer terminals and urge the susceptible to engage in new "battles of the books," from which either the printed page or the monitor will finally emerge triumphant. I hope not. If the past twenty-five years have proved anything, it is that, for the survival of culture, we need all the help we can get, whether in words baked on ancient tablets, set in cold type, or amid the pixels of the scanner and the computer screen.

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The new anti-Americanism

by Roger Kimball

In certain kinds of writing, particularly in art criticism and literary criticism, it is normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning.
—George Orwell, 1946

Another reaction to the events . . . has been to ignore them altogether and to burrow deeper into academic Marxism, concentrate on the more esoteric critiques of American society and capitalism, and chart new approaches toward their delegitimation.
—Paul Hollander, 1995

A new species of political activist has been born with a spirit that is reminiscent of the paradoxical idealism of the 1960s.
—Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, July 2001

The accolades have been extraordinary. The venerable literary Marxist Fredric Jameson opined that it is "the first great new theoretical synthesis of the new millennium." The Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek—a plausible replacement for Jameson as the world's trendiest academic Marxist—declared that it is "nothing less than a rewriting of the *The Communist Manifesto* for our time." Further down the intellectual food chain, Emily Eakins, a journalist for *The New York Times*, delivered herself of an ecstatic summary, simultaneously certifying and increasing the book's prestige. Perhaps, she speculated, it is the "Next Big Idea," the successor to structuralism and deconstruction in the halls of literary academia. It is too soon to say for sure, she cautioned, but, possessed as it is of "the formal trappings of a master theory in the old European tradition," the book "is filling a void in the humanities."

Neither blurb writers nor cultural journalists write under oath, of course. But even with all of the appropriate discounts this is an exceptional outpouring. And what is the object of all these bright encomia? It is *Empire*, a five-hundred-page reader-proof tome written jointly by Michael Hardt, a thirty-something associate professor in the literature program at Duke, and Antonio Negri, an Italian political philosopher in his late sixties who is described on the book's dust jacket as "an independent researcher and writer and an inmate at Rebibbia Prison, Rome."[1] I will say more about Negri below.

It is in some ways a curious success story. *Empire* was published without particular fanfare by Harvard University Press in March 2000. It was in fact something of a sleeper (a term whose dual associations—with the realms of cultural fashion and terrorist espionage—make it peculiarly appropriate for a book that preaches revolution). The book's combination of owlish scholarly pretentiousness, on the one hand, and bristling Communist militancy, on the other, more or less guaranteed it at least a respect-

1 *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri; Harvard University Press, 478 pages, $18.95 (paper).

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ful audience in the academy. About the former—the owlish pretentiousness—it must be said that Hardt and Negri have perfect pitch. There are few fashionable academic clichés that do not make at least a cameo appearance in *Empire*. On every page Hardt and Negri field a large army of names and catch phrases—from Duns Scotus and Nicholas of Cusa to Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, from "postmodernization" to "biopolitical production." Their book luxuriates in a vast proliferation of abstract categories, schema, and prognostications. They are particularly adept at maintaining an atmosphere of inescapable menace. "In the passage from disciplinary society to society of control," they write in one of many passages that takes off from the work of Foucault,

> a new paradigm of power is realized which is defined by the technologies that recognize society as the realm of biopower. In disciplinary society the effects of biopolitical technologies were still partial in the sense that disciplining developed according to closed, geometrical, and quantitative logics. Disciplinarity fixed individuals within institutions but did not succeed in consuming them completely in the rhythm of productive practices and productive socialization; it did not reach the point of permeating entirely the consciousness and bodies of individuals.

Contemporary academics simply adore this sort of thing. Promiscuous talk about "power" and "discipline" seems to provide them with an almost erotic frisson. The charge is especially great when the talk is translated into academese—never say "discipline" when you can say "disciplinarity"—and dark, irresistible forces unrecognized by the rest of us are postulated. Who knows what "permeating entirely the consciousness and bodies of individuals" in the above passage means? Think about it: we are supposed to inhabit that "society of control" Hardt and Negri describe (or warn about: they never describe anything without an air of admonition). In what sense does power or discipline or disciplinarity or whatever permeate "entirely the consciousness and bodies of individuals"—for example, you and me? In no sense. What, for that matter, are "closed, geometrical, and quantitative logics"? Who knows? But the aura of bad news is unmistakable, and for intellectuals bent on promulgating anguish bad news is glad tidings.

Empire is a veritable compendium of such passages. This alone made it a good candidate for academic stardom. And naturally the imprimatur of the Harvard University Press did not hurt. Still, it took a while before the book really developed a following. But by the time Emily Eakins and *The New York Times* caught up with it, in July 2001, translation rights had been lined up in ten countries and the book had become the darling of right-thinking—which means left-leaning—literary academics from New York to Sydney.

It is worth pausing over Eakins's mash note. Not because what she says is astute. She even manages to get the basic message of the book exactly 100 percent backward. But Eakins's panegyric is symptomatic of the smug, destructive cultural milieu that nurtures books like *Empire*.

"Empire" is Hardt's and Negri's term for that transnational, capitalist entity—or perhaps it is a process: it is difficult to say—that has supposedly succeeded the nation state. (The nation state they regard as a dinosaur that is well on its way to the dust-bin of history.) Hence Empire is not coterminous with the United States, though Hardt and Negri clearly believe that the U.S. figures prominently in the architecture of Empire. In fact, what they call Empire does not really exist. Hardt and Negri sometimes come close to acknowledging this (though a page later they are populating Empire with all sorts of powers and attributes). In their preface, Hardt and Negri boldly claim that Empire is "not a *metaphor* but a *concept*, which calls primarily for a theoretical approach."

The words "theoretical approach" should

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send a shiver down the spine of any sensible person. The burden of their remark is to declare intellectual open season. When it comes to applying a "theoretical approach" to a "concept," the bottom line is: anything goes. Still, using a capital letter whenever Empire is mentioned was a sound rhetorical move. It helps to give this airy nothing local habitation and a name, and people who are reassured by being told that something is not a *metaphor* but a *concept* will be grateful for that. Eakins writes that Hardt and Negri believe "Empire is good news." In truth, they excoriate it on virtually every page. "In Empire corruption is everywhere," they write in one typical passage. "It is the cornerstone and keystone of domination." One of their central questions is how the "multitude" (their term for what Marx called the proletariat) can become political and overcome "the central repressive operations of Empire." (The answer, which comes on page 400: "We cannot say at this point.") Does this sound like "good news"? No, Hardt and Negri do not regard Empire as good news. They regard it as Marx regarded capitalism: something so bad that it would necessarily perish of its own badness. (Marx, being a Hegelian, substituted "contradictions" for "badness" in order to invest the process with the appearance of logical necessity, but there is no reason to dignify that philosophical sleight-of-hand by perpetuating the linguistic solecism.)

Eakins is also wrong to suggest that *Empire* may represent the "Next Big Idea." This is mainly because *Empire* is based on a laughably tiny idea, and one that is also old and wrong. The idea, again, is Marx's idea about the inevitable collapse of capitalism. It seemed big once upon a time. It is now as thoroughly discredited as an historical or political idea can be. Hardt and Negri gussy up Marx with a formidable panoply of New Age rhetoric about globalization. But the creaking you hear as you make your way through the book is the rusty grinding of the dialectic: it goes nowhere, it means nothing, but it keeps creaking along.

Eakins is mistaken not only about the intellectual size of *Empire*. She is also wrong about the intellectual size of the movements *Empire* is enlisted to succeed. Structuralism was not an important intellectual development. Neither was deconstruction, or postcolonialism, or new historicism, the other academic fads to which Eakins genuflects. One and all they were—they continue to be—intellectual con-games, utterly void of merit except as tools of obfuscation and intellectual corruption. (They can also help in the campaign to obtain tenure, but that is a separate matter.)

One of the things that makes Eakins's discussion of *Empire* so distasteful is the crass and stunningly superficial view of the humanities it presupposes. It is a view that celebrates novelty and "daringness" to the exclusion of concern for truth. Of course Eakins is not alone in this bad habit. On the contrary, the subordination of permanent human concerns to the winds of intellectual fashion is epidemic in the humanities. It is a major reason that *Empire* is enjoying its fifteen minutes of fame. But the fact that an evil is widespread and popular does not mean it is any less objectionable.

Eakins speaks of "the need in fields like English, history, and philosophy for a major new theory." What those fields really need, however, is not a "major new theory"—or any sort of theory, come to that—but a return to first principles. Professors of literature do not require a *theory* to make Milton or Shakespeare come alive. What they need is a straightforward concern for the text and the questions it raises. Great works of literature are inexhaustible when confronted by candid human curiosity.

It is the same in other fields. Plato or Aristotle or Aquinas or Kant seem like old hat only to someone who has lost the ability to read philosophy. But such persons ought not to be teaching. Eakins quotes Stanley Aronowitz, a Marxist professor of sociology, who praises *Empire* for "addressing the crisis in the humanities, which has reached the point where banality seems to pervade the sphere." Aronowitz is right that there is

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a crisis in the humanities; he is right, too, that it is in part a crisis of banality. But the cause of the crisis is not the lack but rather the ceaseless pursuit of new theories. Is there anything more banal than the expostulations of Derrida, Foucault, and their countless epigones and progeny? The triumph of what goes under the name "theory" has proven to be a prescription for frivolousness, grandstanding, and mendacity. If the past few decades have shown anything about the state of the liberal arts, it is that theory, so-called, does not enliven or illuminate the humanities: it replaces the humanities with an ideological counterfeit.

Which brings me back to *Empire*. Eakins cheerfully suggested that it was "filling a void in the humanities." It would be more accurate to say that it epitomizes that void. I have already mentioned its style. Even Orwell would have been impressed. When he observed that it was "normal to come across long passages which are almost completely lacking in meaning," he surely did not anticipate authors who would be able to keep up the unintelligibility for nearly five-hundred pages. (Perhaps that is why *Empire* is co-authored: the strain of unrelieved crit-speak would have been too much for any one individual.) *Empire* is full of passages like this on "The Dialectic of Colonialism":

> In the logic of colonialist representations, the construction of a separate colonized other and the segregation of identity and alterity turns out paradoxically to be at once absolute and extremely intimate. The process consists, in fact, of two moments that are dialectically related. In the first moment difference has to be pushed to the extreme. In the colonial imaginary the colonized is not simply an other banished outside the realm of civilization; rather it is grasped or produced as Other, as the absolute negation, as the most distant point on the horizon.

It is not just the style of *Empire* that is rebarbative. Its judgments are too. They are mostly a tapestry of Marxist chestnuts updated for contemporary circumstances. Remember the Cold War? Leftist dogma maintains that it is impossible that the United States won the Cold War. Ergo, the fact that the United States did win it—that the policies of the Reagan administration brought about the collapse of the Soviet Union—must be denied at every turn. So it is business as usual when Hardt and Negri solemnly assure us that "the United States did not defeat the socialist enemy" in the Cold War; rather "The Soviet Union collapsed under the burden of its own internal contradictions."

"Internal contradictions"? We require permits for handguns: why not for lethal concepts such as the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic? Its careless use is clearly a public intellectual-health hazard. The dialectic is the ultimate sophist's tool. Marx himself realized this. In an 1857 letter to Engels about an election prediction, Marx wrote: "It's possible that I shall make an ass of myself. But in that case one can always get out of it with a little dialectic. I have, of course, so worded my proposition as to be right either way." Hardt and Negri are not as cautious as the master. They are adept at deploying the dialectic, but they haven't mastered the art of duplicitous ambiguity. Thus they baldly conclude that the Gulf War was "really an operation of oppression"—perpetrated, of course, not by Saddam Hussein but by the United States. The Los Angeles riots they describe as one of "the most radical and powerful struggles of the final years of the twentieth century." High praise indeed! Most of us, looking back over the history of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century, would conclude that there was no international proletarian revolution as Marx predicted there would be. But according to Hardt and Negri such a judgment would be superficial and short-sighted: "actually," they write, the proletariat "'won'" because nation states are not as powerful now as they once were.

I suspect that part of the reason *Empire* is such a hit in the academy is its superior insulation. Hardt and Negri have sealed every

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point of ingress: no hint of reality is allowed to seep in. The single greatest embarrassment to Marxist theory has always been the longevity of capitalism. It was supposed to implode from "internal contradictions" long ago. But here it is 2001 and capitalism is still going strong and making the world richer and richer. Attempting to explain this is the greatest test of a Marxist's ingenuity. Here is how Hardt and Negri handle the problem:

> As we write this book and the twentieth century draws to a close, capitalism is miraculously healthy, its accumulation more robust than ever. How can we reconcile this fact with the careful analyses of numerous Marxist authors at the beginning of the century who point to the imperialist conflicts as symptoms of an impending ecological disaster running up against the limits of nature?

They offer three hypotheses for this imponderable situation. One, that capitalism has reformed itself and so is no longer in danger of collapse (an option they dismiss out of hand). Two, that the Marxist theory is right except for the timetable: "Sooner or later the once abundant resources of nature will run out." Three—well, it is a little difficult to say what the third hypothesis is. It has to do, they say, with the idea that capitalism's expansion is "internal" rather than "external," that it "subsumes not the noncapitalist environment but its own capitalist terrain—that is, that the subsumption is no longer *formal* but *real*." I won't attempt to explain this for the simple reason that I haven't a clue about what it means.

Is there any important option they have neglected? Could it, just possibly, be that the "careful analyses of numerous Marxist authors" was just plain *wrong*? This is a possibility apparently too awful to contemplate, for Hardt and Negri never raise it.

It might seem that the best response to *Empire* is also the easiest: simple neglect. If anything is going to "implode" from its own "internal contradictions," wouldn't it be silly neo-Marxist diatribes written in polysyllabic gobbledygook? Who really cares whether books like *Empire* are considered hot stuff by the folks who run the Modern Language Association? Isn't that just another confirmation of the complete irrelevancy of the academic world today? Writers like Hardt and Negri are clearly out of touch with reality: doesn't that render them harmless?

Would that it were so. Unfortunately, preposterousness has never been a barrier to effectiveness. There are plenty of ideas that are fatuous, wrongheaded, or simply ridiculous that nevertheless have a great and baneful influence on the world. Books like *Empire* are a veritable repository of such ideas. The one unequivocally true statement in *Empire* is the observation (in italics in the original) that "the 'merely cultural' experimentation [of the 1960s] had very profound political and economic effects." Hardt and Negri are both children of the 1960s, Hardt by adoption, Negri because he participated in them to the hilt. *Empire* dilates enthusiastically on the radical movement of the 1960s, on the great benefits of ingesting mind-altering drugs and the happy "experimentation with new forms of productivity" undertaken by the feckless denizens of Haight-Ashbury and other ghettos of irresponsibility.

A prime ingredient of the ideology of the 1960s was anti-Americanism. America—generally spelled "Amerika"—was public enemy number one, not only because of the Vietnam War but also because of its embrace of capitalism and Western liberal values. Susan Sontag spoke for many left-wing intellectuals when she excoriated American culture as "inorganic, dead, coercive, authoritarian," wrote that "the white race *is* the cancer of human history," and insisted that what America "deserves" is to have its wealth "taken away" by the Third World. (Some things never change. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, Sontag published an angry letter in *The New Yorker* lambasting "the self-righteous drivel and outright deceptions being peddled by public figures," in-

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cluding our "robotic President," who did not understand that those terrorists attacks were "undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions.")

Empire is a contemporary redaction of the radicalism and anti-Americanism of the 1960s. It is the intellectual rationalization of attitudes whose practical effects were demonstrated so vividly on September 11. Books like *Empire* are not innocent academic inquiries. They are incitements to violence and terrorism. This is something that Antonio Negri, at any rate, understands perfectly well. Emily Eakins described Negri as a "flamboyant . . . Italian philosopher and suspected terrorist mastermind who is serving a 13-year prison sentence in Rome for inciting violence during the turbulent 1970's."

That is putting it mildly. Antonio Negri was an architect of the infamous Red Brigades, a Marxist-Leninist terrorist group. In 1979, he was arrested and charged with "armed insurrection against the state" and seventeen murders, including the murder of the Italian Prime Minister Aldo Moro, who was kidnapped in 1978 and shot dead fifty-five days later, his body dumped in a car. Negri did not actually pull the trigger. But, as David Pryce-Jones noted in an excellent article about *Empire* in the September 17 number of *National Review*, "The Italian authorities had no doubt that Negri was ultimately responsible. Just before Moro was shot dead, someone telephoned his distraught wife to taunt her, and that person was identified at the time as Negri." He fled to Paris, where he struck up friendships with Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and other specimens of enlightenment. He eventually returned to Italy and negotiated a sharply reduced sentence for "membership in an armed band."

There is nothing in *Empire* to suggest that Negri has had second thoughts about his activities in the Red Brigades. On the contrary, whenever violent insurrection is mentioned, it is praised. In an op-ed piece published in *The New York Times* in July, Hardt and Negri congratulated the violent protesters in Genoa who took to the streets this summer when world financial leaders met there. "These movements," they enthused, "are what link Genoa this weekend most clearly to the openness—toward new kinds of exchange and new ideas—of its Renaissance past." (Hardt and Negri have what might generously be described as an idiosyncratic view of the Renaissance. In *Empire*, they write—in italics, to be sure we don't miss it—that "Michel Foucault's final works on the history of sexuality bring to life once again that same revolutionary impulse that animated Renaissance humanism." I wonder what Jacob Burckhardt would have said about that.)

Empire concludes with a section called "Militant," printed entirely in italics. "In the postmodern era, as the figure of the people dissolves, the militant is the one who best expresses the life of the multitude: the agent of biopolitical production and resistance against Empire." Hardt and Negri praise "the communist and liberatory combatants of the twentieth-century revolutions" and assure us that "militancy today is a positive, constructive, and innovative activity." The most nauseating part of the book comes at the very end: "This is a revolution that no power will control—because biopower and communism, cooperation and revolution remain together, in love, simplicity, and also innocence. This is the irrepressible lightness and joy of being communist."

Although written in the abstract language of the graduate seminar, *Empire* has an ominously pragmatic aim: to undermine faith in the liberal institutions that inform American democracy. It is a poisonous book whose ultimate goal is not to understand but to destroy society. Harvard University Press should be ashamed of publishing it. Sensible citizens should be alarmed that it is glorified by trendy intellectuals and the press. It is sometimes suggested that America's culture wars are over. The adulation showered upon *Empire* and its authors, together with the horrible events of September 11, show that the real battles have yet to be joined.

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The critic as poet: Empson's contradictions

by Paul Dean

It is now seventeen years since the death of Sir William Empson, university teacher, literary critic, and poet, whose first book, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), is still his best-known. When he died, Empson had published five critical works, two volumes of poetry, and numerous periodical essays. Posthumously, an astonishing eight further books have appeared, collecting revised versions of the essays but also including substantial quantities of new material, particularly on Renaissance literature. The most recent addition, *The Complete Poems of William Empson*[1]—edited, like many of its predecessors, by John Haffenden, whose authorized biography of Empson we await as patiently as we can—contains fifty-five pages of introduction, one-hundred-and-seven of text (just over sixty items) and almost three-hundred of notes. There are relatively few additions to the previous *Collected Poems* (1955) so the book's value depends heavily on its daunting editorial matter. One is bound to wonder why relatively short poems should need this much explication and to fear that they must be willfully obscure. Indeed Empson, who, like Eliot, provided some notes himself, was ready to concede that "No doubt the notes are partly needed through my incompetence in writing." He also felt, however, that a virtue of modern poetry was its resemblance to a crossword puzzle, and that "a sort of puzzle interest is part of the pleasure you are meant to get from the verse."

Such an admission can give hostages to fortune. "Aha," said a colleague of mine years ago, coming upon me when I was poring over the *Collected Poems*, "I see you're conning Empson—or is he conning you?" It was a malicious question, but also a fair one. That so many of the poems seem worth the difficulty involved in construing them speaks in their favor. Difficulty need not be an affectation, as the example of Eliot showed, but it can be a cover for spurious profundity. Not that Empson was unaware of that; on the contrary, he was very ready to admit that his poems had been overpraised, and that the postwar failure of his inspiration had been a blessing. He told Christopher Ricks in a famous interview, handily reprinted by Haffenden, "It's only because I stopped in time that you still think it's poetry."[2]

"Life," he wrote in a celebrated note to "Bacchus," his most impenetrable poem,

1 *The Complete Poems of William Empson*, edited by John Haffenden; Allen Lane/The Penguin Press, 410 pages, £30. The volume will be published in the U.S. in June by the University of Florida Press.

2 This is the place to mention, also, Ricks's essay "Empson's Poetry" (1974), reprinted in his collection *The Force of Poetry* (1984), which is the best thing on the subject. Philip and Averil Gardner's *The God Approached: A Commentary on the Poems of William Empson* (1978) is a useful but dry work of exegesis.

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"involves maintaining oneself between contradictions that can't be solved by analysis." This concedes, with typical candor, that his literary criticism was a pursuit of the impossible; for if ever anyone might be thought to have tried to solve contradictions by analysis it was he. Yet he was a mass of such contradictions: a Voltairean rationalist with a strong sense of mystery, an anti-Christian with a highly developed capacity for religious awe, a utilitarian with a compassionate heart, a forensic thinker in a casual style, a defender of the use of biography in criticism who was willing to conjecture or even invent episodes in the lives of his subjects, and a man who insisted on the importance of story in literature and harbored a suspicion of symbolism, whose first instinct was nonetheless to look below the literal surface of a work. As he said in another poem, "The contradictions cover such a range." What are we to make of them?

It is best to follow Empson's practice and be biographical awhile. Born in 1906 to a Yorkshire landed gentry family, he was educated at Winchester and Magdalene College, Cambridge, where he switched his degree subject from Mathematics to English in 1928, was supervised by I. A. Richards, drafted *Seven Types*, took a distinguished First, and was elected to a fellowship of his college, from which he was expelled one month later when contraceptives—or, as the college gloriously called them, "sexual engines"—were found in his room. (He wrote a bitter squib about this, "Warning to Undergraduates," advising, "Lock up whatever it appears/ Might give a celibate Ideas.") After living as a freelance writer in London for two years, he departed for Tokyo in 1931, where he was to teach at the University of Literature and Science.

This marked the beginning of a long estrangement from England and the English cultural scene, from which he was absent between 1931–4, 1937–9, and 1947–52. He underwent the obligatory flirtation with Marxism, which produced *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935, published in America as *English Pastoral Poetry*), although its scope and success transcend the straitjacket of social-class analysis. His arrival at the National Peking University in 1937 coincided with the Japanese invasion, and he fled across China together with pupils and colleagues, to form a university in exile near the border with Vietnam; he was back in Peking for the civil war in 1948 which culminated in the Communist seizure of power. These experiences, at times highly dangerous, gave him a background quite different from that of any other major English critic; his outspokenness, independence of judgment, and suspicion of dogma were hard-won. The Far Eastern period also saw the appearance of his most ambitious, and arguably weakest, book, *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951), whose unfortunate forays into theoretical linguistics have allowed some postmodernists to hijack Empson on behalf of causes he would have detested.

On returning in 1953 to occupy a chair at Sheffield University, he was shocked by the widespread and, in his view, baleful influence of Christianity on criticism, for which he held the later Eliot largely responsible, and he campaigned tirelessly against the "neo-Christians," particularly in writing on Marlowe, Donne, and Milton, all of whom he presented as fiercely heterodox. He reiterated his disgust at Christianity as a primitive religion of blood sacrifice, contrasting it with the nobility of Buddhism. *Milton's God* (1961), a vigorous and sometimes brutal expression of this position allied to a wayward but brilliantly illuminating reading of Milton's epic poetry, produced shock waves. As we now see from the posthumous material, Empson insisted to the end on an approach to literature which was liberal, undoctrinaire (except in opposing dogmatism!), rooted in the human and the social, and affirmatory of life as given tragic dignity by its very finiteness; there are surprising affinities (which I think he would have denied) with Beckett. Empson's patent sincerity, even when he was being monstrously rude, disarmed opponents, few of whom in any case could match the pace, fer-

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tility, and wit of his writing. Honors came his way; invitations to deliver the Waynflete Lectures at Oxford and the Clark Lectures at Cambridge, visiting professorships in retirement—at Penn State, Delaware, and Miami Universities, among others—a peace-making honorary fellowship of Magdalene, and a knighthood "for services to English literature" in 1979. This last gave him particular pleasure, as he had developed a positive veneration for the person of the Queen since meeting her on a visit to Sheffield in 1954, an occasion which was marked by the production of a masque, *The Birth of Steel*, for which he had written the words. At his death, Empson was counted, along with Richards, Eliot, and Leavis, as one of the great twentieth-century critics. Ultimately, we read his poetry because it is by Empson the critic, just as, perhaps, we read Eliot's criticism because it is by Eliot the poet. Yet if no balanced appreciation of Empson can omit the poetry, its importance and quality are hard to pin down.

The publication of *Poems* (1935) and *The Gathering Storm* (1940), which contain virtually his entire poetic output, coincided with his first stint in the Far East. The first volume, he would explain, was mainly "love poems about boy being too afraid of girl to tell her anything," whereas the second, whose title he claimed Churchill cribbed, was more political, written in the midst of a war which he could see was going to become global. "My few good [poems]," he added, "are all on the basis of expressing an unresolved conflict." As mentioned above, his poetry petered out; there is only one major unpublished poem from after the war, a two-hundred-line piece in praise of his wife Hetta (whom he married in 1941), which his executors continue to withhold. Marriage and fatherhood, he admitted, might have slackened the tensions from which the poems sprang. One cannot feel that poetry came easily or naturally to him—he knew too much about it and was to some extent writing to a program. The early work belongs to the period of the younger Eliot and Auden and the 1920s rediscovery of the metaphysicals, especially Donne, whom he sought to imitate "with love and wonder"—not the later Donne, when he was Dean of St. Paul's, but his younger self, Jack Donne of the Inns of Court, who, Empson insisted, challenged Christian orthodoxy on fundamental points and constructed an alternative love-religion in which he and his mistress became saintly celebrants of an erotic liturgy.

The pieces which Empson wrote in this period combine energy and opacity in a startling degree, as Donne does, but they can also break out, as Donne can, into what Empson called "the singing line." Indeed, many single lines lodge themselves in the mind almost as mantras: "It is Styx coerces and not Hell controls" ("Plenum and Vacuum"); "Bees sting their need, the keeper's queen invader" ("To an Old Lady"); "Law makes long spokes of the short stakes of men" ("Legal Fiction"); "learn a style from a despair" ("This Last Pain"). Many of the poems struggle with the problem of bringing about, through love, a union of two persons into a mystical oneness, an endeavor constantly frustrated, it seems, by the physical and psychological separateness and isolation of each.

"The Ants" (1928—dates are those of first publication) imagines humans as scuttling insects, feeding off each other as ants do off aphids. In "Invitation to Juno" (1928), the conjunction of rationality and sexuality, or of two lovers, appears as the centaur and as the bicycle, both seen as unnatural, yet "Ixion rides upon a single wheel," i.e., the sterile circularity of the self is the greatest torment.

A more extended treatment of the theme comes in "Arachne" (1928) which opens with an explicit statement of the contradictions which plague our condition:

> Twixt devil and deep sea, man hacks his caves;
> Birth, death; one, many; what is true, and
> seems.

The existence of surface tension in water,

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which means that an insect must keep on top of it or be drowned in its gravitational pull, becomes a metaphor for the poise in human relationships that is virtually unattainable and whose pursuit always courts disaster:

> His gleaming bubble between void and void,
> Tribe-membrane, that by mutual tension
> stands,
> Earth's surface film, is at a breath destroyed.

The lovers are two molecules, the least number that "can with full tension strain," but the poem ends not in triumph but in fear of the woman: the relationship approaches, in Donne's famous image, "the spider love, which transubstantiates all,/ And can convert manna to gall":

> We two suffice. But oh beware, whose vain
> Hydroptic soap my meagre water saves.
> Male spiders must not be too early slain.

Haffenden's notes cite writings by the scientist J. B. S. Haldane, the classicist F. M. Cornford, and Darwin—and this for a comparatively straightforward poem! The learning isn't pedantry here, however; the movement of the iambic line and the finesse with which the terza rima is handled give "Arachne" a quality of grave music. It was one of six poems by Empson to appear in *Cambridge Poetry 1929*, and together with "To an Old Lady" and "Villanelle" was praised for its "compelling drive" by F. R. Leavis—who, however, later became disenchanted when Empson felt bound to defend I. A. Richards's *Coleridge on Imagination* against a withering review by Leavis. "That terrible capacity for the intellectual game, for getting the ball back over the net, for never being at a loss—that's not thinking," Leavis wrote in a letter to Ronald Bottrall. Empson was unfazed by the hostility, mocking Leavis in the poem "Your Teeth are Ivory Towers" (1940): "Panoplied in/ Virtuous indignation, chewing his bone,/ A man like Leavis plans an Escape." These two great critics were never interested in understanding one another; still, it is possible to think that Empson overrated Richards, whose extravagances about semiotics and Basic English badly infected *Complex Words* in particular.

Yet this fierce young Empson, radical, aggressively (too self-consciously) modernist in his incorporation of scientific concepts and terminology into his poetry, can also exhibit tenderness, as in the poem on his mother, "To an Old Lady" (1928). This opens shamelessly with Lear's "Ripeness is all," which endows it with a factitious resonance, but then makes adroit use of Donne's symbol—to which Empson returned obsessively in his criticism—of the loved person as a separate planet. The old lady's planet is "cooling" with age, her remoteness makes access to her a kind of space travel, to be prepared for by reconnoitering her with a telescope:

> Watch while her ritual is still to see,
> Still stand her temples emptying in the sand
> Whose waves o'erthrew their crumbled
> tracery;
>
> Still stand uncalled-on her soul's appanage;
> Much social detail whose successor fades,
> Wit used to run a house and to play Bridge,
> And tragic fervour, to dismiss her maids.

This is beautifully generous, while retaining an amused detachment; the "rituals" are those of a kind of social religion, resting on unarticulated depths of propriety and feeling; the painful dignity of shrinking horizons is suggested through a stiff-upper-lip understatement. Empson felt his lack of Christian belief to be a barrier between himself and his mother, yet his feeling of loving dependence is real, and stunningly given voice in the last stanza:

> Stars how much further from me fill my
> night.
> Strange that she too should be inaccessible,
> Who shares my sun. He curtains her from
> sight,
> And but in darkness is she visible.

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The epic grandeur ("darkness visible" describes the lake of Hell in Book I of *Paradise Lost)* is finely achieved, and seems unforced. Empson celebrates a kind of inscrutable majesty and resilience in his mother. Like most parents whose children want to be poets, she felt he ought to have a "proper job," but her reaction when, to his horror, she happened upon a copy of "To an Old Lady," is sublime: "I will say, that poem about your Granny, William, now that showed decent feeling."

One of the most impressive poems in Empson's first volume is "This Last Pain" (1932), which he later disparaged, wrongly I feel, as dangerously close to affectation. The theological tenet (horrid enough, we may agree) that part of the torments of the damned is consciousness of the bliss they have rejected is generalized into a statement about what Johnson called the human "hunger of imagination":

> All those large dreams by which men long
> live well
> Are magic-lanterned on the smoke of hell;
> This then is real, I have implied,
> A painted, small, transparent slide.

Empson isn't being cynical, or presenting reality as insignificant; he feels a kind of awe at the transfiguring power of imagination even when it goes terribly wrong. Nor is he naïve; the magic lantern, borrowed (as Haffenden says) from "Prufrock" but also, I suspect, from Proust and Rimbaud ("painted plates" is one possible gloss on the title of *Illuminations*) is used to diagnose a warping kind of romanticism which justifies the painful puzzle of the world by offering compensations hereafter. Yet, in a final return upon himself, he also recommends a certain amount of illusion as a way of preserving humility and dignity; epistemology is too vast a topic to make certainty other than presumptuous:

> Feign then what's by a decent tact believed
> And act that state is only so conceived,
> And build an edifice of form
> For house where phantoms may keep
> warm.

(Compare Eliot: "Our lot crawls between dry ribs/ To keep our metaphysics warm.")

> Imagine, then, by miracle, with me,
> (Ambiguous gifts, as what gods give must be)
> What could not possibly be there,
> And learn a style from a despair.

Yet what can be imagined *is*, in a sense, "there." We are close to Beckett's brain-teasing title: *Imagination Dead Imagine*. Empson's own "ambiguous gifts" of syntax allow the reflection that, if imagination is a miracle, so is imagining "with" another person; we are lucky if we escape the closed circle of our own consciousness. Despite this implication, "learn a style from a despair" is rather too tempting as a summary of his procedure, and apt to mislead; one wouldn't want to call the tone of the poem despairing.

If *Poems* documents the gaucheries of young love in a clotted and gnarled style, *The Gathering Storm*, for all its ominous background, has a greater proportion of simpler poems, some of them translations or adaptations from Chinese. Empson's affair with a young Japanese woman, a nursemaid, seems to have released him into song, as in the unusually autobiographical "Aubade" (1937), which begins from a shocking submerged parody of the question "Did the earth move for you too?": "Hours before dawn we were woken by the quake." The lovers' indecision, about not only this situation but also their relationship in general, seesaws between two tolling refrains: "It seemed the best thing to be up and go" and "The heart of standing is you cannot fly." The girl, anxious to rejoin the baby whom she was supposed to be supervising, hurries off in a taxi, leaving Empson to reflect:

> I slept, and blank as that I would yet lie.
> Till you have seen what a threat holds below,
> The heart of standing is you cannot fly.

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The earthquake foreshadows the World War, but is also a harsh reminder of what lies beneath the surface of societies and individuals; the poem's verdict on "risings" (military and sexual) is "It is on contradiction that they grow"—on ambiguity, or incompatibility, but also on the zealot's intolerance of alternative opinions. Empson struggles with the problem of commitment here, to a cause, a person, or a person who is also a cause. He concludes that—to use the title of a poem written a year earlier—"Courage Means Running." Finally he quit Japan; Haffenden intimates that the affair with the girl had an untidy and painful end.

The villanelle form of which Empson was so fond turns up again in "Missing Dates" (1937), which he once said was his best poem. Its dominant feeling is regret at lost time (hence the title) and wasted opportunity.

> Slowly the poison the whole blood stream
> fills.
> It is not the effort nor the failure tires.
> The waste remains, the waste remains and
> kills.

Many have rightly heard the opening of Tennyson's "Tithonus" echoed here: "The woods decay, the woods decay and fall." Yet if "Tithonus" is a lament for the curse of immortality without eternal youth, "Missing Dates" recognizes that, as someone once said, we die of being alive. Empson is no sentimentalist, and isn't attracted by the idea of stopping time, but nor does he idealize the process of aging.

> Not to have fire is to be a skin that shrills.
> The complete fire is death. From partial fires
> The waste remains, the waste remains and
> kills.
>
> It is the poems you have lost, the ills
> From missing dates, at which the heart expires.

"Not to have fire" is not to have torment, but also not to have energy and purpose; a human being beyond time or suffering would also be beyond humanity. There are implications here for Empson's preference of Buddhism to Christianity. Death is "the complete fire" because it is total destruction, total purgation—but also total energy? (The Buddhist "Fire Sermon," with which Empson prefaced the *Collected Poems*, explores this paradox.) To live a half-life, warmed by "partial fires," is the most lethal thing, yet that is the human condition. This vision of emotional entropy is one of Empson's most somber and powerful poems.

"The Teasers" (1940) must be quoted in full.

> Not but they die, the teasers and the dreams,
> Not but they die,
> and tell the careful flood
> To give them what they clamour for and why.
>
> You could not fancy where they rip to blood,
> You could not fancy
> nor that mud
> I have heard speak that will not cake or dry.
>
> Our claims to act appear so small to these,
> Our claims to act
> colder lunacies
> That cheat the love, the moment, the small
> fact.
>
> Make no escape because they flash and die,
> Make no escape
> build up your love,
> Leave what you die for and be safe to die.

Haffenden admirably discusses the complex textual history of this poem, but the finished product can stand by itself. It had an electrifying effect upon a group of A level students with whom I once discussed it. "It shows there can be poetry after Eliot," one remarked. They were moved by its broken music, its poise and undulating swell ("a beautiful metrical invention," Empson rightly claimed), even while expressing bafflement as to what it meant. Teasers and dreams are both puzzles and may be illusions, but their very ephemerality is haunt-

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ing; the amorphousness of water and mud (which is neither wholly water nor wholly earth) makes "our claims to act," i.e., both the claims upon our action and our claims to act purposively, appear petty, since we seek to confine forces which constantly elude our grasp. The mud which "will not cake or dry" may suggest human feeling, perpetually in flux or transition, refusing to crystallize into a "small fact." The poem struggles with contradictions which it cannot wholly encompass, but it sees that as a major consequence of being alive.

The last stanza is a virtuoso performance. Whatever "escape" means—evade responsibility, become a recluse, even commit suicide—we ought not to do it, because the illusions which might lead us, in despair, to seek a way out, are transient, but *if* we do it we must not give that transience as our justification. If instead we commit ourselves to love, the inescapable "small fact" of death is offset by our leaving something behind (children?), and it is this *for which* we die, a willing self-forgetfulness; we can then be "safe to die," having endowed our lives with meaning. However, the lines may have a less comforting interpretation: if we renounce "what you die for," we then relapse into a state of narcissism in which we may feel safe; but to "be safe" in that way *is* "to die."

The recurring idea that I've noted, the simultaneous desire for, and impossibility of, total union with another person, is unforgettably expressed in "Chinese Ballad" (1952), a translation of part of a poem written in 1945 by Li Chi, a Communist who collected traditional peasant poems. "I always feel it clears the palate after a reading of my stuff," Empson winningly remarked. Two lovers are on the point of parting, the boy having to return to the army. They pause at the turning of a stream where there is thick mud, and the girl asks him to "Make me two models out of this,/ That clutches as it yearns," to symbolize them. ("The point is," Empson commented, "that she is turning like the stream as well as sticking like the mud.") She adds:

"When you have made them smash them back:
  They yet shall live again.
Again make dolls of you and me
  But mix them grain by grain.

"So your flesh shall be part of mine
  And part of mine be yours.
Brother and sister we shall be
  Whose unity endures.

"Always the sister doll will cry,
  Made in these careful ways,
Cry on and on, Come back to me,
  Come back, in a few days."

The mud of "The Teasers" reappears here, to cake and dry as a symbol for the fusion which no one described better than Empson's beloved Donne:

When love, with one another so
  Interinanimates two soules,
That abler soule, which thence doth flow,
  Defects of lonelinesse controules.

This is from "The Extasie." Empson wrote, probably in 1929, a poem with the same title which was not printed until 1989 and which begins, by a striking coincidence:

Walking together in the muddy lane
The shallow pauses in her conversation
Were deep, like puddles, as the blue sky;
So thin a film separated our firmaments.

The muddy lane supplies, in "Chinese Ballad," the sacred talismans of the lovers' oneness and faithfulness. But the tragedy of the situation comes at the end; for all the mystical union of the pair, they are still physically separated, and, in a temporal paradox which Empson felt was genuinely metaphysical, the female doll will cry "always" for the other's return "in a few days." (Again one thinks of Beckett, this time *Godot*.) The models are also symbols of the children that the couple hope to have once the war is over: "Were there no magic in the dolls/ The children could not thrive." The stabbing directness of this poem is a great

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achievement, but its vision is no different from that of Empson's most gnomic utterances.

Nobody would claim that Empson as a poet ranks with Eliot or Yeats, although he has worn better than some other figures touted in the 1920s as modernist poets, such as Bottrall or Edgell Rickword. He belongs to a certain moment in early twentieth-century culture when, briefly, poetry, science, mathematics, and logic seemed to be going to cross-fertilize one another as they had done three-hundred years earlier. (That they did not is probably due to the awesome difficulty of the science involved; few had Empson's ease with it. Instead, science and technology have come to be gods in our world, while poetry is cheerfully ignored when not regarded as recreational reading.) This "metaphysicality" was given voice—indeed, to some extent, created—by Eliot in his essays "The Metaphysical Poets" and "Andrew Marvell," both of 1921, and in his Clark Lectures of 1926; it owed something to Pound's lamentable aphorism "Poetry is inspired mathematics" and the vogue for Chinese, and much to I. A. Richards. Eliot's words on Donne in the fifth of his Clark Lectures are apt for Empson's poetry:

> We watch a strange kaleidoscope of feeling; with suggested images, suggested conceits, the feeling is always melting, changing, into another feeling; we get a kind of unity in flux. . . . There is no *structure* of thought, but every thought is felt, every image has a peculiar feel to it.

Just so: Empson's poems are least successful when he is being most rigorously logical.

Empson's undergraduate career, we recall, began in Mathematics and ended in English. He was the only major English critic of his time who really understood such disparate disciplines; he was too big a personality to be satisfied with a mechanistic view of the world and too good a critic to go on producing poems by acts of will. In "Let It Go" (1949), which he said was "about stopping writing poetry," he mused, as in "Missing Dates," on the increasing difficulty of making sense of experience, concluding, "You don't want madhouse and the whole thing there." In the end, as with all poetry worth the name, the reason we go on reading Empson's is to hear a voice. It is, as in this line, gruff, intimate, and oddly tender; to invert Eliot on Marvell, it has a lyric grace beneath the tough reasonableness.

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Three poems
by Elizabeth Spires

Triptych

for three tenses

1.
You find me in every photograph,
gravely staring out at you,
whispering *sotto voce,* "Remember . . ."
You try to walk away but can't.
Dear one, you must carry me,
carry me on your back.

2.
You live for me but never meet me,
beseech me with "If only . . ."
I hear your refrain and am bored.
I have no face except the one you make,
hideous or lovely, as in a myth.
If you *did* see me, you'd be terrified.

3.
Always I am *here,*
your tireless faithful companion,
and yet you fly in the face of reason
and prefer those other two.

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Grass

I walked in the waist-high grass
where a million blades
sang in green cacophony.
Too many voices sang.
And in the din, I thought,
we are as grass,
as simple as grass,
our voices will be lost
and all things pass . . .

I desired then
to be silent and alone,
like a stone spilled
by time into a field
the mower slowly
scythes, a stone
completely unto itself,
warmed by the sun,
shining in the sun.

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Curio

Today, wave upon wave,
memories wash up
on the bracken-covered beach.

I walk the tideline,
picking and choosing,
making the worthless precious.

Stone, shell, carapace,
I put this one and that one
into my pocket.

What was ignored, passed over,
what nobody else wanted,
I will place among the curios,

discrete, exposed to
light's radiance. See how
they glimmer and shine.

Closer, come closer, and you
will smell the briny smell
of time, and sea, and rot.

That day, I will recall later,
laughing or weeping, brought
to my knees once more

by holy memory. *What once*
was alive is dead, is alive
in memory . . . I'll say to no one.

Wave upon wave, the memories
come. Nothing will stop them
until I, too, am a memory

to the ones that I loved.

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Theater

Loveless renderings

by Mark Steyn

It is a truism that "transgressive" art is for the most part drearily conformist—shocking and controversial only about things its audience already agrees on: Giuliani is a Nazi, religious people are repressed sex fiends, etc., etc. So it comes as a pleasant surprise to find, at London's Royal National Theatre, a play that is genuinely transgressive. Not in its many scenes of simulated sodomy punctuated by "butt plugs," "rimming," "golden showers"—yawn, yawn, been there, done that, you're probably saying—but in the message its many gay sex acts convey.

Mother Clap's Molly House is by Mark Ravenhill, celebrated author of the 1996 hit *Shopping and Fucking*, with its memorable finale of an anal rape with a fork (shopping and forking?). Five years on, Ravenhill has graduated from the bad-boy precincts of the Royal Court to the mainstream respectability of the National, but his preoccupations are the same as before—if you prefer, love and consumerism. For gay men, sex and commerce have long been intertwined, even in the language ("a bit of rough trade"). Ravenhill's text is loosely based on a study of London's eighteenth-century gay culture by Rictor Norton, also called *Mother Clap's Molly House*, after a gay tavern-cum-brothel-cum-music-hall in Holborn run by one Margaret Clap and the target of a notorious raid, the Stonewall of the 1720s. Ravenhill's play diverges somewhat from its source and its dialogue is not always punctilious about period detail, but the world it portrays is plausibly drawn.

The playwright opens things up in 1726, in Mr. Tull's costume shop, where the clientele are mostly whores. A novice to the game, a squealing, nubile country girl examining her hymen with a mirror is being kitted out as Little Bo Peep, prior to selling her virginity for twenty guineas—that's twenty-one pounds, which is some high-priced hymen for 275 years ago. This is not, in the fullness of things, an important part, but Danielle Tilley manages to be both hilarious and affecting, a level of performance in a minor role that reminds you of the great strength of companies like the National.

At any rate, the rigors of the business take their toll on Mr. Tull, and he subsequently expires from the pox, leaving the firm to the missus. Inspired by her apprentice boy's tentative exploration of his sexuality, Mrs. Tull (Deborah Findlay) calculates she'd make more money from the shop's stock renting them out to "mollies" (the preferred term of the day—"We're molly. We're jolly. Get used to it"). Thus, eighteenth-century London, in the first flush of urban, business-fueled expansion, discovers the lucrative gay market—what Britain now calls the "pink pound." Mrs. Tull opens a "molly house," which is something rather more than a brothel: men hire the costumes and other props, cross-dress, role-play, and enjoy each other in all manner of ways, in-

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cluding sexually. It is in the broadest sense a "house of pleasure."

Some of the details are historically grounded: a "pregnant" boy gives birth to a doll—a routine popular in male bawdy houses of the day. (I found myself thinking of "My Blue Heaven": "Just Molly and me/ And baby makes three.") Others are merely Ravenhill riffing on the subject: a pig man up from the country spends his last shilling on an apprentice lad but can only achieve (as we say in Clinton's America) "completion" when his partner starts grunting and oinking like Lord Emsworth's Empress of Blandings.

Aside from the Hogarthian and Restoration comedy elements, there are also two glamorous deities—the gods of love and commerce who rule our lives. The latter, who trumpets the virtues of the market economy, is, if not gay, certainly misogynistic. "Arse will always triumph over c***," he declares. There are also many dud jokes and some nods to *The Beggar's Opera* in various musical interludes by Ravenhill and Matthew Scott. The director, Nicholas Hytner (best known in the U.S. for *Miss Saigon*, but in line to succeed Trevor Nunn as director of the National), wraps all the tonal elements together with a bawdy, theatrical flamboyance that yet knows the better part of valor: he's aware he's juggling explosives, and he's canny not to waste his powder shocking for the sake of it. The petticoats and whalebone look great, and the timber-framed set by Giles Cadle manages to include an impressively Ziegfeldian staircase. (At the first night interval, Cameron Mackintosh was gleefully telling folks it should have been called *Hello, Molly!*)

The first act ends with the gay boys singing "Shit on them who call it sodomy/ We call it fabulous." The "fabulous" strikes an anachronistically Cole Porter note, but perhaps it's meant to prefigure the scene to come. The second act opens bang up-to-date—London 2001, at what is referred to as "a sex party orgy underwear sort of thing" being thrown by two moneyed gays in a sleek angular warehouse. Cue the water sports, etc., mentioned earlier. A plump, trussed S&M figure wanders around with a sort of sex-aid camcorder remorselessly taping the goings-on. Everyone's doing everything with everyone. "I tell you, these poofs have got it sorted!," marvels one envious straight.

But the hosts are bored and a little cranky. The guests are played by the same actors from Mother Clap's 275 years earlier and recognizable from the earlier roles, but this time all the pleasure seems to have gone out of the proceedings. The playfulness of the molly house is wholly absent. Sex is joyless relief, mechanical copulating, jaded brutish humping. Confined to the shadows, gays wanted love without pain. What's on display instead is pain without love—sometimes in the bloodiest way. The jolly shepherdess returns, this time sullen, dead-eyed, and moronically "homophobic." She is covered in the facial ironmongery to which so many of our young persons are prone and has just had her labia pierced. Alas, this latest piercing goes very messily awry. As one character, Tom, demands of his gay friends, when did cruelty enter the equation? "This is the future, people doing what they want to do, people being what they want to be. So why do you have to make it all wrong?"

The contrast with the first act is unavoidable. Is this sexual "liberation"? The freedom to couple impersonally, perfunctorily, unfeelingly, to lead lives of glittering hollowness? Ravenhill scatters his ideas wildly and incoherently, and (in schizophrenic contrast to *Shopping and Fucking*) a manic determination to entertain means his critique is just idly floated rather than seriously argued. But he nevertheless posits something far more controversial than anything in *Angels in America*—that gays have so commodified and trivialized sex that they have rendered it loveless. I don't want to cause the poor fellow any difficulties by implying that he's making a conservative case—anyone who's seen the press Andrew Sullivan gets in the gay media knows what the stormtroopers of the totalitarian identity-

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politics left do to those of their own who get out of line. Ravenhill is ferociously anti-capitalist, anti-materialist, blah blah, but from this left-wing perspective he suggests that consumerism and self-indulgence have infected and corrupted the most intimate essence of man—the capacity to love.

I don't know whether that's true. I don't attend enough gay orgies. But Ravenhill has produced a rare justification of the "transgressive" artist's standard excuse—that it's not just the explicit sex, but the explicit sex in *context*. There is more raw, more brutal sex than in any production of recent years, yet the effect is profoundly unsexy—which is the point: this is a play about the loss of love. By the time we return to the eighteenth-century for a surprisingly tender coda between Mother Clap and a heterosexual transvestite (burly Ian Redford, great fun), Ravenhill has posed—if not answered—all kinds of questions. And, despite the superficial provocations of the rampant buggery, that's exactly what a National Theatre ought to be doing.

A comparison with New York is instructive. It's conceivable this scathing vision of drug-dazed gay ennui could come to town, perhaps even to Lincoln Center. But only because its words are in the mouths of Englishmen. Were an American gay to write this play and submit it to a New York producer or leading regional theater, he'd be plunged into all kinds of difficulties—on the one hand, because the American theater is more genteel and, on the other, because the group-think crowd police dissent from the party line far more aggressively. This combination of middlebrow coyness and the left's insistence on dubbing any alternative views as "hate" has brought the gay movement a long way. But the American left has also achieved something one would not have thought possible: it has made homosexuality one of the utter bores of the age. Listening to the drones of GLAAD, you find it hard to credit that gays were once considered sparkling, witty, amusing, creative—back in the days when homosexuality was (to quote Larry Hart's lyric) "too good for the average man."

The other day a gay columnist in Chicago accused me of being "homophobic" because I'd described George W. Bush as "homoerotic." You'll recall that the President had said he'd looked into Vladimir Putin's eyes and got a sense of his soul. What I wrote was: "The natural instinct of us uncompassionate conservatives is to yell: Get a grip on yourself, man! This is a KGB apparatchik. Lay off the homoerotic stuff about soulmates!" This is "homophobic"? Why? I've used the word "homoerotic" a thousand times over the years in discussing plays and films and TV dramas. The "homoerotic subtext" is one of the most beloved clichés in the critic's armory: if they don't teach it in How-To-Be-A-Drama-Critic correspondence courses, they ought to. But apparently my use of the word now proves I'm a "hater." In such a world, let us cherish the London stage, where gay iconoclasm has not yet been outlawed.

It's no wonder that with so many sensitive flowers ever ready to find offence on race, orientation, and gender the theater finds it easier just to sit things out. The other day *The New York Times* had an interview with Mark Hollmann and Greg Kotis, authors of *Urinetown: the Musical*: "When I start to think about writing a musical seriously," Mr. Kotis said, "I think——" Mr. Hollmann finished the thought: "Why bother?"

Urinetown (at the Henry Miller), you won't be surprised to hear, is an ironic musical. It started with an idea: the thought that one day the transnational corporations would so dominate our lives that they would charge us even to go to the bathroom. It's not as fanciful as it sounds: in Britain, a popular euphemism for micturition is to "spend a penny," after the one-time standard charge for municipal toilets. Nonetheless, Hollmann and Kotis thought the idea of a company with a monopoly on "comfort stations" was so absurd it could only be done as a musical. A bad musical. A musical in which characters cut each other short by explaining that's "too much exposition." Whatever point they once wanted

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to make about the suffocating grip of the corporate state is drowned out by the, er, splashy production numbers. This is not unenjoyable (I haven't seen the Broadway transfer, which opened in September; I'm referring to the production earlier this year). A musical about urine—even one that's, in the British expression, taking the piss—is still a cut above musicals about musicals, musicals about operetta, musicals about Hollywood, and all the other lame parodies parodying things most of us only know from other parodies. But it can never rise to the level of such classic urinary tracts as, say, *Clochemerle* (Gabriel Chevalier's comic epic about the installation of a pissoir in a French village) because of its reflexive ironic crouch. To do so would involve, as Hollmann acknowledges, "bothering."

There's less and less reason for any American author to "bother." The Orwellian assault on language, waged in the name of "tolerance," has made it all but impossible to discuss the great themes of the age with any honesty. Why would anyone bother? It's no wonder that, in such a culture, our drama is either plonkingly earnest or inventive mostly in its use of form—if you can't say anything, then the way you don't say it becomes the only measure of your art. The problem, it seems to me, is that the critical fraternity hasn't yet caught up. They go along in search of characters to get involved with in situations that engage us, and thus are doomed to disappointment.

Take *Snatches* by Laura Strausfeld (at the 78th Street Theater Lab). *The Daily News*'s Robert Dominguez complained of its protagonists that "they never become three-dimensional characters." Gordon Cox in *Newsday* felt there was "nothing emotionally compelling." These would be legitimate criticisms of, say, *Romeo and Juliet* or *Three Sisters*, but today it's as useful as pointing out a Toyota Corolla has no rumble seat. In *Snatches*, two insecure women witter on about men, hair, and how to use both to land a job. The girls happen to be Monica Lewinsky and Linda Tripp, and the dialogue is taken verbatim from the transcripts of their telephone conversations. Naturally, when one hears of such a project, one assumes it will be pro-Clinton or (less likely) pro-Starr, against Washington's assumed *droit de seigneur* or (much more likely) against prurient hypocritical Republicans. Instead, from the moment we first see the ladies sprawled across their beds like gossiping schoolgirls in *Bye Bye Birdie*, it's clear that Miss Strausfeld's interest is not directly political.

Instead, her "docudrama" offers up one of the most inane, trivial, shallow, and banal texts of any drama ever played on the New York stage. And, as with the brute sex in *Mother Clap*, its banality is the point. This dialogue is on the record and on cassette: these women actually said these things. Through 1998 and 1999, the pundits and the politicians argued about the integrity of the presidency and the national interest, but this is what the two women who started it talked about: big hair and big salaries. Indeed, Miss Strausfeld suggests that what drove Linda to do what she did is that Monica stole her stylist.

It should be said that the play is a little unfair to Linda Tripp, who was recording the conversations and therefore in a sense already performing. But Monica's conversation, even by the degraded standards of American college graduates, makes for grim listening. The hair tips are Monica's principal area of expertise. The rest of the time she's asking Linda idiot questions like whether "auspices" is a synonym for "assumption." But Miss Strausfeld is not interested in "three-dimensional characters" being "emotionally compelling." Her busy, stylized staging is meant to lend a cool distance and to emphasize the barrenness of their lives. The author's message is a simple one: there's no there there. These are people who are as close to the center of things as you can get, and yet they have not the slightest interest. Nothing matters: the world intrudes on Monica's self-obsession only when it inconveniences her, when the president can't take her call because Sad-

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dam's playing up again. It is just so not fair: Iraq, like, totally sucks.

Where Miss Strausfeld goes wrong is in the casting. Their faces are rarely visible, and for most of the play we're looking at a blonde wig and a brunette wig. But, when we do get a glimpse at what's underneath the hair, Patricia A. Chilsen seems too brassy and confident for Linda and Jean Taylor too svelte and old for Monica. This appears to be deliberate, to make us aware that they're playing their parts rather than inhabiting them. But if the author's point is that there are no depths to plumb it would have been better made if the actresses were more convincing representations. And, while it's true that one can read the Monica/Linda transcripts and come away reeling at the shallowness, the same can be said of the Starr report and the quoted remarks of the president. When Monica announces that she's going back to Oregon to see her former lover, a high-school drama teacher, the President of the United States says, "He's such a jerk!" When Monica asks him to call her at home in California, he says he doesn't like to because it's difficult to talk when her parents are there. This is the leader of the free world reduced to a schoolboy.

Something of the same quality occasionally infects Adina Taubman's one-woman docudrama, *Doing Justice*, which briefly played New York at the Fringe Festival. Once again the text is from the mouths of real people —in this instance, the citizens of Littleton, Colorado. In some ways, the plays are oddly identical, both conjuring a world of rootless comfort whose pampered inhabitants seem devoid of the social capital on which their forefathers prided themselves. Miss Taubman is a very poor actress. She also suffers from the fact that what happened at Littleton doesn't have the same clear narrative thrust as a play like *The Laramie Project*—gentle loving gay martyr jumped by redneck bigots—so her material can't be packaged with quite the same confidence. As a result, Miss Taubman isn't quite sure who the bad guys are and tends to give them all the benefit of the doubt—teachers and cops and parents and pastors and psychologists—until, by the end, you can't help feeling the sympathetic tone of the piece is an evasion. Beth Manspeizer's stop-start staging—heavy on blackouts—doesn't help.

What's missing is any sense that Miss Taubman's swollen dramatis personae have any backstory, any lives before the play began. Considering that they're all real human beings, that's quite an accomplishment. But there's a remarkable lack of curiosity about what things were like before the shooting: a disruptive event has to have something to disrupt. Littleton seems to be affluent, perhaps a touch soulless and poorly planned, as is the way with prosperous suburbs, and overly reliant on the nostrums of the ages. (The two killers passed their anger-management classes with flying colors.) Maybe they should have gone to church more, maybe guns should be harder to get, maybe parents should know their children, maybe the teachers should have noticed, or the cops, or the friends, or the neighbors. Maybe, maybe, maybe. *Doing Justice* winds up paralyzed by its own awkwardness in the face of its subject.

I would like to record a representative joke from *Peggy Sue Got Married* (at London's Shaftesbury Theatre), a new musical based on the 1985 Francis Ford Coppola film, with music by Bob Gaudio (of the Four Seasons—not Vivaldi, but the Sixties pop group) and book and lyrics by Arlene Sarner and Jerry Leichtling, who wrote the movie. The story concerns a forty-two-year-old woman, her marriage in trouble, who, at her high-school reunion, is suddenly whisked back to 1960. Will she make the same mistake and fall for the same guy all over again?

But here's the representative joke: she used to be a hip chick, now she's a chick with hips. Remember, when the show comes to New York at a hundred bucks a ticket, you could have got this witticism a lot cheaper in the West End.

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Art

Clyfford Still: the importance of being earnest

by Daniel Kunitz

An artist of Old Testament passions, far more alien to the current mindset than his contemporaries among the Abstract Expressionists, Clyfford Still seems an impossibly remote figure. Considering his achievements requires us to confront a spectacle of seriousness verging on outright pretension at a time when seriousness itself is not taken very seriously. This is not to say that we live in a world of zero gravity; ambivalent though we may be, we have our moments of seriousness. Our difficulty in looking at Still's work is that the terms under which he labored have changed and the world along with it. Political, encyclopedic, cosmopolitan, pragmatic, ironic, allusive: our governing sensibility, whether we like it or not, is the inverse of Still's. In his day, Still deliberately cut an "untimely" figure (Nietzsche, who extolled the *unzeitgemäss*, was one of Still's favorite writers). Like Ezra Pound—the Idaho-born modernist poet whom Still resembled in his crankiness, his peripatetic life, and his peculiarly American blend of academicism and autodidacticism—he was out of step with his time, even if his fierce solemnity of purpose was not.

"I'm not interested in illustrating my time," announced Still in 1976. "A man's 'time' limits him, it does not *truly* liberate him." Walking through the Hirshhorn Museum's illuminating exhibition[1] of thirty-nine paintings from 1944 through 1960—"when," writes James T. Demetrion, the museum's director, "the artist's creativity burst forth and flowered"—I couldn't help wondering how such a stern, single-minded presence would be received today, in a time that has tossed aside artistic earnestness like a suit that has gone out of fashion. In the most useful and best written of the show's catalogue essays, Brooks Adams identifies (with varying degrees of evidence) an astonishing host of artists who were in some way influenced by Still's work, everyone from Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns to Hassel Smith, Edward Dugmore, Anne Truitt, Susan Rothenberg, Alfonso Ossorio, Robert Moskowitz, Morris Louis, Jules Olitski, the Germans Per Kirkeby and Anselm Kiefer, Walter de Maria, Jay DeFeo, Richard Serra, and Philip Taaffe. That these artists all found inspiring elements in his work attests to Still's continuing, if relatively unnoticed, relevance to the art world of the last forty years or so.

Fittingly, it is the work of two young California painters, Laura Owens and Monique Prieto, both of whom practice an updated version of color-field painting, which offers the most telling evidence of how much the aims of art have diverged from

1 "Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944–1960" was on view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., from June 21–September 16, 2001. A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by James T. Demetrion, has been published by the museum in association with the Yale University Press (175 pages, $50).

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those of Still's day. For her landscapes and landscape-based abstractions, Owens thickly applies acrylics and oils in broad swathes of color, leaving large areas of raw canvas untouched. Prieto's slick and highly colored abstractions, also in acrylic, virtually mimic Still's characteristic forms. (Still, by the way, always used oil paint and mixed his own pigments.) Yet, what both artists extract from Still, aside from similar imagery, is a highly un-Still-like focus on the decorative. Their substance lies in allusions to past artists, Still chief among them, and so, while their paintings look like his from a distance or in reproduction, in person, close up, they have none of the older artist's depth and disturbing intensity. Their flatness is not just flat—it's all surface, a sheen of colors laid on air. Still's flatness, on the other hand, stands as a rebuke to surfaces. One must consider, then, that when younger artists, and perhaps younger viewers, encounter Still, they often bracket out the spiritual project at the core of his oeuvre and thereby the formal decisions informed by such a project—they can't discern the bone and sinew through the skin.

Much of the responsibility for his odd position in postwar art must be attributed to Still himself. In a generation of irascible, uncompromising artists, he exceeded them all in his difficulty and his absolute mistrust of the art establishment—the museums, curators, galleries, and collectors upon whom he was forced, at times, to rely. Still said he "learned as a youth the price one pays for a father, a master, a Yahweh, or his contemporary substitute—An Institutional Culture." As an adult, he fought his own idiosyncratic battle against the sort of institutional culture that might de-bone his art. Ever the romantic revolutionary, he claimed to have no influences, and signed his paintings "Clyfford" to avoid using his patronymic. The restrictions Still and his estate placed on his work have made viewing it particularly difficult. During his life, he donated groups of paintings to the Albright Knox Gallery in Buffalo and to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and, in 1986, his widow donated another ten works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but all three institutions agreed that none of the works would be loaned out or exhibited alongside the work of other artists. More than two-thousand paintings and works on paper remain in the estate, locked away until—as his will specifies—an American city establishes a museum dedicated solely to showing and preserving them. For its show, the Hirshhorn had to cull paintings from the approximately one-hundred-and-fifty pieces sold before Still's death.

Born in 1904 in Grandin, North Dakota, Still grew up in Alberta, Canada, and in Washington State, where he studied at Spokane University and at Washington State College. Like Jackson Pollock, Still was a Westerner, and, while he led a more geographically restless existence than his colleague, Still shared with Pollock an abiding interest in Native American motifs. The works on view at the Hirshhorn were made during a decade and a half of bicoastal travel: until 1960, he alternately lived in New York City and took teaching stints in the San Francisco Bay area, his students and followers there forming what came to be known as the Bay Area Figuratives.

Mr. Demetrion acknowledges the "strong likelihood" that Still would have disliked this show. In fact, the first painting one comes upon, *May 1944 (Jamais)*—originally titled simply *Jamais*, the work was given its dated title sometime after 1947, when Still decided to eliminate all but dated and numbered titles from his work—strikes such a discordant note with the tenor of the rest of the works on view that I can't help thinking the artist would have been horrified by its inclusion. Surrealist in style and atypically humorous, the painting depicts, in a vertical format, an elongated, black figure with the comically tiny, round head and wide eyes of an extraterrestrial in a sci-fi film. The figure, which occupies a shallow foreground, is screaming; low and to the viewer's left a red sun hovers before a ground striated with streaks of yellow, brown, and gray. Despite

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the fact that many of its elements are recognizably by Still—the red sun, the black body ripping through the canvas like a rift—*May 1944* introduces a bizarre note of levity in a show that continues in a tone of mournfully tragic awe. For most of his life, and for the entire period covered by the Hirshhorn, Still grappled exclusively with the sublime. Were it not for that first work, one never would imagine he had time for surreal antics.

Also in the first room, one finds another somewhat atypical, surrealist-inspired canvas, *Untitled* (1945), in which, against a black ground, a jet of white paint shoots upward, looping around itself several times, and then across and down to a yellow, ant-farmlike horizontal box. Atop the white jet sits a small red shape, caduceus-like though without the snake. Originally called *Self-Portrait*, a title that renders the work as inscrutable as the artist himself, it seems to me less a self-portrait than a stage in the journey to find the self Still wanted to present.

That journey actually ended a year prior to *Untitled*, with *1944-N No. 2* (also called *Painting 1944-N* and *Red Flash on Black Field*), a purely abstract work that trembles with the will to sublimity and is the show's first example of the artist's mature style. As the original title indicates, *1944-N No. 2* again employs a black ground, across the top and down the right side of which a broken red flash of lightning breaks. At and near the canvas's upper edge, two jagged flashes of yellow and white paint tear into the black field, cutting the red flash in two places; and, in the lower right corner, a passage of dark blue and white paint erupts like a miniature geyser.

Thinkers such as Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant associated the sublime with the feeling—oscillating between terror and uplift—one has before vast displays of nature: a mountain, the ocean, a storm on a plain. Still strove for just such powerful effects. And, despite the fact that his paintings remained abstract, metaphors for describing them tend to hew to the natural and the theological: one finds no hard edges or perfect curves within his canvases. Looking at his epically sized works (size being an important component of the sublime), critics tend to cite landscapes and shifting weather. To my eye, Still's patterns and shapes suggest lightning, deltas, rivulets, chasms, stains spreading, flames, animal hides, and tectonic faults. Indeed, one can only invoke technology in its capacity to magnify: for instance, some of the paintings resemble tissue cross sections seen through a microscope.

By attempting to body forth the sublime in pigments, Still joined, or was joined by, a number of his contemporaries. In this regard, two of his friends in the Forties and early Fifties, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman, provide an instructive counterpoint to Still's practice (expectedly, Still had fallen out with them, and with Pollock, by about 1952). A little remarked upon and foggy aspect of the sublime in art is that it so often slips into decoration—a quality associated with the beautiful in the classic philosophical distinction between the beautiful and the sublime. That faint line between the sublime and the decorative explains why some people stand in front of one of Rothko's multi-layered chromatic skeins and are overcome with emotion while others, equally engaged by the work, see a harmony of design, alluring colors, a perfect accompaniment to a Jean-Michel Frank side table. Not only does Newman and Rothko's work straddle that line, but even Pollock's delicate composition and designer's mastery of color (his lavenders and silvers) can, for the right beholder, tip the balance into decoration. What distinguishes Still's efforts in the sublime from those of all his contemporary abstractionists is that he never courts the decorative; he actively fends it off.

Having learned from Matisse's visual hedonism and Milton Avery's compositions, Newman and Rothko each possessed a discriminating sense of taste. In Still's Sturm-und-Drang universe, tastefulness limits the artist's freedom, the full range of his expression. Unfettered, Still's paintings disrupt

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the calm and unity of a room. Where his two friends were, at base, formalists in sensibility, Still was a romantic and a conservative. Newman and Rothko invested in the placid sureties of rectilinear shapes, and, with their thinly painted surfaces, they achieved, in Clement Greenberg's words, "a more positive openness and color." (Given Still's unformal romanticism, it is a credit to Greenberg's taste that he appreciated the artist's work.) Still opted for the energy of non-geometric forms and shapes with no hard edges; his textured surfaces emphasized the spontaneity of the draughtsman's hand, highlighting their dynamism. In a painting such as *1949-F*, wherein a continental form of gray, black, and white in the upper left-hand corner balances two small islands of black and yellow in the lower right, a single crimson drip slashes through mottled, white ground, rattling its harmony. The violence of Still's canvases counteracts any tendency toward decoration: his jagged edges and rough textures seize the eye, instead of allowing it to slide smoothly over the whole.

One problem with such unrelentingly dramatic paintings as Still's is that, when viewed in bulk, each must sweat it out with the others for primacy of power, a power that is inevitably dampened—or exhausted—by their cumulative effect. Defined in part by an accession to limitlessness, the sublime overwhelms: emotional intensity in the paintings is limited only by the picture frame. There can be few peaks or valleys in a show pitched to the highest decibel level. Two extraordinary works, however, at the Hirshhorn would seem to belie this notion of the show as an amplifier with the volume control stuck on ten. A virtually all black canvas not quite bisected by a dim, Newmanesque white line, *1951–52* (*Untitled*, 1952) instantly calls to mind the history of black paintings from Rembrandt's blacks and Goya's *Dog* to those of Ad Reinhardt, Frank Stella, and Robert Rauschenberg. Here it might be said that the miniscule strip of red at the lower left edge and the blue-gray passage in the lower right corner, as well as the slightly asymmetrical counterweighting caused by the white stripe, contribute to a milder emotion, foreboding, say, than that of the other works.

Similarly, the red-on-black painting, this time with a black line just off-center, *1955-D*, which of course points to Rauschenberg's reds, Yves Klein's blue paintings, and perhaps Warhol's gold ones, not to mention Newman's zips and Rothko's floating fields, might provoke in some viewers a more contemplative mood. Whether or not these two canvases attain a sublime, operatic height depends on the viewer. "You only find," writes Greenberg, paraphrasing Kant, "what you look for." Or, as Still put it, rephrasing Greenberg some eight years later:

> I want no allusions to interfere with or assist the spectator. Before [the pictures] I want him to be on his own, and if he finds in them an imagery unkind or unpleasant or evil, let him look to the state of his own soul.

Strangely, Still furnished his spectators with his own, internal allusions—copies, which could only interfere with the spectator's contemplation of a particular work. The only Abstract Expressionist to move in this direction, Still throughout his career made close copies (his term was "replicas") of certain works, two examples of which were on view in Washington. Because the bulk of Still's oeuvre languishes beyond the reach of scholars, it is, I believe, impossible to make a complete account of the replicas. At various times, the artist claimed to have made them in order to preserve for himself some paintings that he sold, to clarify notions that he had abandoned in earlier versions, or as mnemonic devices. In his catalogue essay, Neal Benezra takes a stab at explaining this unorthodox practice, but wastes most of his space defending Still against the charge that the existence of the replicas argues against the performative and spontaneous theory of artistic creation proffered by Harold Rosenberg in "The American Action Painters." Benezra need

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hardly have gone to the effort. Action Painting was from the first an inaccurate moniker and no defense against it is needed.

I can say that, in both instances available—*January 1951* versus *1951 No. 2* and *1951-T No. 2* versus *1951-T No. 3*—the earlier, "original" versions strike me as being unquestionably stronger works, a judgment ratified in the case of *1951-T No. 2* by the artist himself, who also preferred it to *No. 3*. And it's not hard to comprehend Still's choice. While the imagery persists almost unchanged from *1951-T No. 2* to *No. 3*, the colors take a somewhat disastrous turn: the dark purple at *No. 2*'s left edge becomes a muddy brownish purple in *No. 3*; the dull yellow ground and orange streak on the right becomes, in *No. 3*, egg-shell white and a darker red-orange. These shifts in color diffuse the play of light and the satisfying color juxtapositions of the earlier work, making it look like a study. Again, in *January 1951*, the black over-painting becomes, in *No. 2*, a rubbed-out mix of blue with black marks, muting the energy of a work further reduced by *No. 2*'s considerably smaller size.

Perhaps all one can say about the replicas at this point is that they stand as evidence of the obstacles any artist faces when trying to recreate potent emotions or ideas in series. And perhaps they argue for Still's desire to control the viewing of his work. Like the American transcendentalist painters, who never quite escaped their own sentimental understanding of the sublime, Still wrought a single, mystical notion to as close to perfection as he could manage. How a younger generation will respond to these paintings depends in large part, I think, on whether we believe today that earnestness is inherently more serious than humor. That this remarkable exhibition, complete with photographs and documents (the inclusion of which Still would no doubt have hated), lofts more questions than it fields is a credit to its curators—they have not attempted to make this thorny artist into a smooth-stemmed rose.

Exhibition note

"Czech Cubism, 1912–1916,"
at the Rupertinum, Salzburg.
July 21–October 7, 2001

Perhaps the second most common complaint one hears from people who patronize movie theaters today concerns volume: the soundtrack is much, much too loud. (The most common complaint, of course, has to do with the poor quality of most new movies.) An analogous complaint can be lodged against museum exhibitions. What we might call the visual volume always seems to be set on "high." More and more, substance takes a back seat to design. Or, if that seems an overstatement, say rather that the design of an exhibition often competes with its substance. Everything, from the wall labels to the PR, is super slick. And then there is the issue of education. No exhibition these days is complete without a large "educational" component. The scare quotes, alas, are necessary, for much of what is meant to have the effect of education winds up being decidedly uneducational, or educational in the wrong way. The point is that an exhibition of visual art should speak primarily to the visual sense. The educationists have got into the act with their wall texts and explanatory labels, their audio guides and lectures and panel discussions and field trips. Just about the last thing a viewer is encouraged to do is—view. Paintings were made to be looked at; many exhibitions today encourage viewers to regard the paintings as illustrations for a story going on elsewhere—in the wordy labels accompanying the paintings, say, in the abundant promotional materials, in the soundtrack of the audio guide. Doubtless it is all done with the best intentions, but the net effect is to discourage people looking for art from actually looking at art.

How refreshing it was, then, to discover a quiet exhibition at the Rupertinum Museum für moderne Kunst in Salzburg that was intelligently and professionally put together and had the good sense and daring

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to concentrate on the art work. Everything about this exhibition is minimal except the works of art on view. There are no explanatory wall labels. A brief, thoughtful catalogue is available, but in the galleries the hundred-odd paintings and sculptures are left to speak for themselves. Even the art gallery itself—a new museum that is housed in an old convent—provides the kind of quiet and unadorned spaces that the best art finds welcoming. The irony is that by eschewing the machinery of the educational establishment, this relatively modest exhibition of one-hundred-and-twenty objects turns out to be far more educational than most exhibitions that neglect the work for the sake of the message it is supposed to communicate.

Braque and Picasso pioneered Cubism in Paris in 1907. Their innovations were soon ready for export. Thanks largely to the art historian and collector Vincen Kramář, the Cubist aesthetic quickly made its way to Prague, where the artists included in this exhibition absorbed not only the pictorial language of Cubism but also its ethic of radical innovation. As the catalogue for the exhibition notes, what was primarily an aesthetic revolution in Paris became an existential imperative in Prague. Cubism was not simply a source of aesthetic sustenance: it also supplied the rudiments of a "*Weltanschauung*." Not only were there Cubist paintings and sculptures, but also Cubist films, theater, music, even, God help us, Cubist architecture and ashtrays. Cubism, we read in the catalogue, provided "the gate to the poetics of avant-garde art in Central Europe." The impulse towards abstraction that Cubism embodied emerged as a promise of freedom in a society beset by political unrest and social chaos. A few years earlier, the realism of Daumier and Munch were the prime inspirations for Czech artists; by 1912, that influence had been decisively supplemented by Cubist themes and motifs. But what emerged in Paris as an exuberant aesthetic cosmopolitanism took on a brooding, inward quality in Prague. If Cubism in the hands of Braque and Picasso exhibits the qualities of "freedom and playfulness" (as the catalogue essay puts it), in the work of Czech artists it is a darker, more psychologically troubled matter.

Of the nine artists represented in this exhibition, only Josef Čapek (brother of the playwright and novelist Karel Čapek) and Emil Filla are known names in the United States. They are also the artists whose work in this exhibition is the most distinctive and aesthetically rewarding. Čapek's series of Cubist portraits—many of which are titled simply *Kopf* ("Head")—represent a nuanced and original combination of Cubist motifs inflected through the psychological intensities of Munch. Filla's work is probably the most vital and accomplished in the exhibition; his ambitious painting *The Smoker* (1913–14) is the one clear case in which Cubism was not merely absorbed but also perfected in an individual register. Other works, notably "Still life with Glass and Pear" or "Glass and Bottle" (both 1914), testify to his thorough assimilation of Braque's compositional and tonal mastery.

It is unfortunate that modest, historically grounded exhibitions like "Czech Cubism" are out of vogue. Quite apart from acquainting viewers with good and sometimes excellent work they are unlikely to see elsewhere, it reminds us that some of the best and most satisfying exhibitions take place in quiet oases, far from the glare of the art world machine.

—*Roger Kimball*

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Architecture

More & more Mies

by Mildred Schmertz

Two immense and comprehensive exhibitions of the architecture of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe (1886–1969)—one at the Museum of Modern Art[1] and one at the Whitney Museum of American Art[2]—have just departed from New York for international venues. Why Mies? Why now? Phyllis Lambert, one of the world's leading patrons of architecture, decided that the time had come, more than three decades after his death, to reevaluate and reinterpret the master's architecture. Lambert is famous for persuading her father, Samuel Bronfman, then president of Seagram, to fire the California firm of Luckman and Pereira as architects for the skyscraper he planned to build on Park Avenue and to allow her to choose an architect capable of creating a masterpiece. She met and researched the work of the leading international modernists and in 1954, guided by Philip Johnson, selected Mies.

Lambert went on to found the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 1979, which has assembled a comprehensive archive of Mies research and previously unstudied Miesian material, including drawings and collages, photographs, project documents, and memorabilia. Mies himself gave the Museum of Modern Art his collection of some 20,000 drawings in 1968. And Terence Riley, chief curator of MOMA's department of architecture and design, also had the idea of a new Mies show, to follow the one created by Arthur Drexler in 1986 to celebrate the centennial of the architect's birth. Riley and Lambert agreed to share their archives and mount two exhibitions, his to explore Mies's work in Berlin, hers to focus upon the master's architecture in America.

The American work of Mies is well known to both admirers and critics of modern architecture. Few have failed to visit at least one or two of his office towers —in New York City, the Seagram Building; in Chicago, the Federal Center; in Toronto,

1 "Mies in Berlin" was on view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, from June 21–September 11, 2001. It will also be seen at the Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin-Preussischer Kulturbesitz (December 14, 2001–March 10, 2002) and the Fundacion La Caixa, Barcelona (July 30–September 29, 2002). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Terence Riley and Barry Bergdoll, has been published by the Museum of Modern Art and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (394 pages, $70).

2 "Mies in America" was on view at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, from June 21–September 23, 2001. It will also be seen at the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal (October 17, 2001–January 20, 2002) and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago (February 16–May 26, 2001). A catalogue of the exhibition, edited by Phyllis Lambert, has been jointly published by the Canadian Centre for Architecture and the Whitney Museum and is distributed by Harry N. Abrams (791 pages, $75).

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the Dominion Center. Most are familiar with Mies's residential towers—Chicago's Lake Shore Drive Apartments, the urban renewal projects Lafayette Park in Detroit and Colonnade Park Apartments in Newark, and Westmount Square, a combined office and residential complex in Montreal.

Mies once famously said that he had no intention of inventing a new style every Monday morning. Even his low-rise structures, the Barcelona Pavilion, the little Farnsworth House in Piano, Illinois, and the New National Gallery in Berlin, have a common style. And except for the chapel, a simple brick and glass cube, the factory style he created for the campus he planned and built for the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago was used for almost every building there. Each was conceived as a single universal space adapted to a specific function—administration, library, laboratory, teaching, or student commons. Mies's biographer Franz Schulze called him "the century's supreme architect of the one-room building."

In the last decade of his life, Mies turned out to be a useful target for the polemic of postmodernist architects and critics. By the turn of the 1960s they were finding his structurally and aesthetically perfected towers and low-rise pavilions of universal space a diminution of architectural form and repetitious beyond excuse. "Less is a bore," declared Robert Venturi. The rational purity of Mies's architecture lost many of its champions and was deemed sterile because of its abandonment of ornament, neglect of tradition, and failure to adapt to the qualities of a given environment. Furthermore, Mies's urban renewal residential projects fared no better than those of lesser architects because, as Jane Jacobs was among the first to point out, the widespread destruction of viable neighborhoods in the process of replacing slums with high-rise housing was an immense mistake of public policy that deserved to fail and did.

The charge that Mies spawned all the bad architecture perpetrated in the name of the modern movement is unfounded. The ugly buildings that have been blamed on him were part of the oncoming industrialization of the building process. Mies made a new architecture out of the possibilities presented by technical advances in the manufacture of steel and glass, but others were not capable of matching or continuing his level of effort.

Most architects are merely competent, and their clients, ordinary businessmen rather than enlightened patrons, understandably choose to build fast and cheap. Few architects have matched Mies's passionate care for proportion and detail, and few clients anywhere would pay for such a level of architecture.

In the thirty-two years since his death, postmodernism has come but not gone. The developers who build tract housing, megamansions, and high-rise apartments, all decorated with classical pastiche, are giving their customers what they want. The neo-modernists are here and the best of them, Frank Gehry for one, are making technological and formal explorations of their own, just as Mies did, but now aided by the computer. Given that today's vanguard architectural culture is very much alive and well, it would be unrealistic to expect—or even want—the MOMA and Whitney exhibitions to bring about anything resembling a Miesian revival. This in no way diminishes Mies's significance, however, because historically, there is no more important figure in the legacy of architectural modernism.

"Mies in Berlin" presented the work of a quarter-century of practice in Europe, from the opening of his Berlin office in 1913 to his emigration to the United States in 1938. Much of it had never before been displayed as important in its own right, but only as a prelude to his accomplishment in America. The curators Riley and Barry Bergdoll believe that the virtual dismissal of Mies's architecture of this period came about because earlier generations of historians and critics chose to present the architect as a modernist almost seamlessly from the start.

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The Museum of Modern Art, more than any other institution, helped construct this image. In 1932, Mies was featured in the MOMA's first exhibition of architecture, "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition," organized by Philip Johnson and Henry-Russell Hitchcock. It was followed by a 1947 exhibition titled "Mies van der Rohe," organized by Johnson, and finally by the aforementioned Arthur Drexler posthumous show in 1986.

Few of the works in "Mies in Berlin," except for the very early traditional houses, would be unfamiliar to anyone who is interested in modern architecture, but the difference between seeing little black and white images in the margins of texts and the magnificent original drawings, often huge in scale and drawn by Mies himself, is nothing short of revelatory. The exhibition began with several handsome presentation renderings by Mies's first masters, Karl Friedrich Schinkel, Peter Behrens, and Hendrick Petrus Berlage. Mies's classical work followed with his great drawings for the Bismarck Monument Project (1910), one of which, a courtyard perspective, was only recently discovered.

The beauty (and indeed the very existence) of Mies's traditional houses will come as a surprise to many. The exhibition included excellent recent photographs by Kay Fingerle of those that remain, all well preserved. Also newly photographed by Fingerle were the rebuilt Barcelona Pavilion originally constructed in 1928–29, and the Tugendhat House (1928–30). The show also included Mies's original model of the house.

On view were the early sketches, photomontages, collages, and renderings of the Friedrichstrasse Skyscraper Project (1921), the Glass Skyscraper Project (1922), and the six-story Concrete Office Building Project (1923), as well as studies of his first, unbuilt modern house projects, all very familiar examples of Mies's early moves as a modernist, but rarely presented through his original, beautiful graphics. Urban design studies were included as well as photographs of two still existing housing estates—the Afrikanischestrasse Municipal Housing (1925–27) and the Weissenhof Housing of the same period.

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It could not have been easy to make "Mies in America" as interesting to look at as "Mies in Berlin." After settling in the United States, the architect perfected an aesthetic adaptable to all of his work and used it consistently for three decades. The specter of endless monotony must have haunted the exhibition's designer Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle as he examined Mies's dozens of sketches in soft pencil, draftsmen's careful delineations of corners where steel meets brick, and studies of façade proportions beyond count—graphics that could only interest the most serious students of Mies's oeuvre, in this most serious of shows. Manglano-Ovalle's task was to infuse variety, diversion, and relief for visitors making their way from the early Resor House, through the many versions of the Illinois Institute of Technology campus plan and buildings, on to the Farnsworth House, to

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high-rise apartment and office towers, and eventually to the late masterpieces, the Seagram Building and the New National Gallery in Berlin.

Instead of building enclosed rooms, Manglano-Ovalle placed wall panels to define freely formed spaces that weave and flow into each other, to give museum visitors an experience of Miesian space. He displayed four rare and beautiful models made by Mies's office for the completed designs of the unbuilt Resor House (1937–43), the unbuilt Convention Hall for Chicago (1953–54), the Seagram Building (1954–58) and the New National Gallery in Berlin (1962–68). All were poorly lit, but the Seagram model, exquisitely fabricated in bronze, suffered most from this surprising curatorial failure. Since real buildings are best seen in daylight, models should be exhibited in light that approximates it. Manglano-Ovalle chose a very low light level throughout the exhibition, except for a bright gallery that contained excellent photos by Guido Guidi and Richard Pare.

The general dimness couldn't be more unlike the light-filled spaces of Mies's actual buildings, but of course it enhanced the films and videos. There was a memorable installation, the work of the architect Ammar Eloueimi: a computer-generated digital construction of the Illinois Institute of Technology's unrealized Library and Administration Building. Made from Mies's sketches and renderings, it takes the viewer through the building as it would have looked in the changing light over the course of a day.

A video installation, however, that was conceived as the culmination and climax of the show was memorable for its awfulness. The old and splendid model of Mies's last work, the New National Gallery, placed in the center of an enclosed room almost as dark as a cinema, was barely visible and overwhelmed by a film continually projected on an immense screen. The subject of the film is Mies's real building, not a simulation, and it displays a gallery interior with a glass wall that overlooks the building's terrace toward Berlin's Forum of Culture. Produced by Manglano-Ovalle, the work is a projection of twelve hours of footage shot in a single day, beginning at dawn and ending at dusk, that has been condensed to sixteen minutes using time-lapse technology. Twenty people mysteriously appear, move about, and disappear during the time sequence. The caption explains it all: "The artist sought to render the building as a single timeless element of the film, disturbed only by an ephemeral human presence."

It wouldn't have seemed so bad had it not been for the pretentious music. Throughout the exhibition, a specially commissioned work could be heard softly in the background, but within the darkened chamber, it surged. The composer, Jeremy Boyle, may have thought he was creating music that would intensify the visitors' perceptions of Miesian atmosphere and space in ways that drawings and models cannot. Instead he produced a score that belongs in a movie like *Jurassic Park III* to herald the first appearance of the flesh-eating dinosaurs. When the show opens in Montreal, Lambert should turn off the music and turn up the lights. Theatrical overkill does not belong in an exhibition as earnest, carefully studied, broadly researched, and intelligently organized as "Mies in America."

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Music

What Westminster wrought

by Jay Nordlinger

It wasn't a major label—no rival to Columbia, say—but it was what some call a "major minor" label, and it was a distinguished one. Westminster Records produced LPs from 1950 to 1965. Now many of those albums are back on compact disc under the rubric "Westminster: The Legacy." This is one of the many gifts of the remarkable, shiny, hardy CD: since its advent, we've had an explosion of "historic recordings." The truism should be repeated that never before has so much music been available to so many.

One of those represented in the new series is Artur Rodzinski, the Polish-born conductor who was one of the keenest musicians of his time. He is rather underrepresented on compact disc—despite our blessed explosion—and he deserves to be better remembered. From 1933 to 1948, he led the Cleveland Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in succession. He raised standards everywhere he went. Rodzinski was an unsparing autocrat, in the old, now-vanished mold, but he knew what he was doing, and he got results.

Such results can be heard on his Westminster disc of Dvořák's *Slavonic Dances*. These are terrifically successful pieces, taking off from Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* (with which they're often paired on recordings). There is a competing set from Fritz Reiner, leading the Vienna Philharmonic (on London Classics). Reiner and Rodzinski had much in common, temperamentally, musically, and managerially. Each was feared but thoroughly admired. In the Dvořák, Rodzinski conducts the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, the house that Sir Thomas Beecham built (or rather, one of them).

Rodzinski gives these dances all the character and spirit they are due. They are pieces of many moods, and the conductor captures them all. Some he gives a country, rustic flavor, to go with the elegance and polish of the concert hall. He demands—and, of course, gets—great ensembleship, with each section of the orchestra precise and in balance. We hear tonal richness, bracing dynamics, and rhythmic brilliance (essential for this music). The playing is *exciting*, too, with the RPO players obviously relishing their time with the maestro.

The key to conducting music like this is to treat it—unfailingly—as great music. Rodzinski accords each piece both dignity and a dance-like joy. Rarely has Dvořák been so well served. If this is what the age of the dictator produced, bring it back!

Another of the Westminster artists was Clara Haskil, one of the great darlings of twentieth-century pianism. By "darling" I mean that she was beloved, revered, by an audience that particularly appreciated spirituality and a simple honesty in music. She belongs to that class of pianist that includes Dinu Lipatti, Myra Hess, and maybe Lili Kraus. (Is there something about women? That is perhaps the subject of another ar-

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ticle—but the short answer is no.) Haskil was one of those of indeterminate nationality, first Romanian, then Swiss. She studied with some of the finest minds and talents of the age: Fauré, Cortot, Busoni. She was a remarkably complete musician.

The Westminster disc begins with Mozart's D-minor concerto, a work made for Haskil: it demands spirituality and a simple honesty. Her playing conveys a remarkable sanity and serenity, a state of being composed. It is pure. She has no excesses or tics. Her phrasing is perfect (in a word), and so is her tone. The concerto has both divinity and an earthly bite. Ever sensitive, Haskil attends to each detail, but she isn't fussy or prissy. Her playing is astonishingly limpid and even. In the opening Allegro, she gives us a cadenza of almost unbelievable grace and perception. The Romanza is simple, lovely, transcendent. This is very much a recording for other pianists to learn from, and Haskil was, indeed, a "pianist's pianist."

There are two great surprises in this performance. The first is that the collaboration of the conductor Henry Swoboda and the Winterthur Symphony Orchestra—not exactly immortal names—is excellent. And the second is sadder: that the closing Rondo fails. Here Haskil becomes mousy, too retiring, lacking in blood, that earthly bite. She isn't so much limpid as limp. This mars a recording that might otherwise belong in the pantheon. But then, perhaps it does anyway.

What surely belongs in some pantheon is the Scarlatti playing that follows the Mozart. There are eleven sonatas—or *esercizi*, exercises, as the composer called them—on this disc. Haskil's Scarlatti album (1950) is famous among piano lovers and record collectors, and its return is special cause for rejoicing. All the pianist's hallmarks—refinement, purity, musicality—are on full display. Her playing is clear and beautifully woven, or interwoven. She is not too literal, but rather musically apt. She imparts romantic qualities, but they're never out of place. The sonata in C-sharp minor is ghostly; other sonatas are positively heavenly. Haskil makes full, unabashed use of the piano, and she settles any question, as far as I'm concerned, about whether this music should be played on the modern instrument. It fairly must.

A remarkable spirit, Clara Haskil. Does she have any heirs today? One would have said Murray Perahia—but in mid-career he came under the influence of Horowitz, and changed. One wonders whether the old Perahia—of which there's still a portion, to be sure—will return.

A second Westminster conductor was Pierre Monteux, the long-lived Frenchman with the bushy mustache. It was he who conducted the famous premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in 1913. He was also a noted teacher of conducting. In his eighty-seventh year—1962, two years before his death—the company captured him with the London Symphony Orchestra in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Monteux was known primarily for French and Russian music, but he was a fine conductor of Beethoven, as of everything else.

Monteux's opening movement, while unorthodox in certain ways, is a thing of beauty and inspiration. It has clarity, strength, and majesty, with all problems nicely worked out. The playing is precise, natural, and unburdened. We feel we're in for an unusual, light-filled Ninth. The Scherzo, unfortunately, is fraught with technical errors. It is sloppy, lacking crispness and fire. It is sort of spongy, tired, and should have been re-done. The Adagio is smooth and adequate, but it's not especially yearning or revelatory. It also includes some odd fluctuations in tempo.

The final, choral movement features a very strong quartet: Elisabeth Söderström, Regina Resnik, Jon Vickers, and David Ward (a Scottish bass, now essentially forgotten). There is much to admire about the old man's handling of this movement. Not least, there is a touch of holiness about it, and a translucence. When the strings introduce the famous theme, all is radiant. But

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the movement is plodding in spots, and the execution, as in the Scherzo, is ragged. Vickers, however, is his usual heroic self, one of the best Beethoven singers, in any vocal range, we've ever had. The singing of the quartet generally is sensitive, warm, and moving. Yet the performance seems poorly rehearsed, and the movement is strangely uneven, full of fits and starts: it has moments of uplift, and it has moments—long ones—of indifference and mediocrity.

I wouldn't attribute this unevenness to Monteux's advanced age: he was commanding, as well as angelic, until the end. And this recording, despite its serious defects, is worth listening to, for Monteux is a powerful musical mind, even when he's not at his sharpest.

A conductor very much at his sharpest—at his towering peak—was Hans Knappertsbusch in his Westminster recording of Bruckner's Eighth Symphony (and more). "Kna" directs the Munich Philharmonic, and his Eighth is a marvel. It has everything it needs, chiefly musical and spiritual vitality. At every moment in this long symphony, Knappertsbusch is alert. That may seem unremarkable, but it isn't: Knappertsbusch never puts the music on "autopilot" or "cruise control," as is so common in conducting, particularly in Bruckner. Under this baton, the work is taut, not sprawling, not flabby, not overly languorous. This is Bruckner with a Beethoven-like oomph. Of course, there is reverie when appropriate; it's not that the reading is without introspection; it's that it is always moving, having a purpose.

The Scherzo lifts you out of your seat. Everything is perfectly timed, perfectly weighted. It gives the impression of riding a horse, of letting the animal freely gallop, while keeping a proper grip on the reins. The thrill of Bruckner is easily lost when inferior conductors are involved, and this recording restores that thrill, for those who may have forgotten. As for the Adagio, it is a long, gorgeous thing, whose internal logic the conductor must understand, as Kna surely does.

The Finale is—quite simply—stunning. The nobility and strength here are shattering. Knappertsbusch was a glorious combination of head and heart—an instinctual musician with a healthy respect for the score. He brings out the triumph—the spiritual triumph—that is perhaps at the core of Bruckner. The Beethovenian shaking fist, followed by triumph. Knappertsbusch was a big musician—not unlike Otto Klemperer—who shone in a big work like this.

There are smaller pieces of Wagner on this disc, starting with the *Lohengrin* Prelude, ethereal, shimmering, dreamlike. This account does not have great beauty of sound or precision of technique, but it is musically unimpeachable. Then we have the *Siegfried Idyll*, Wagner's little birthday gift for Cosima. Kna gives it the right intimacy.

Last, there is the Prelude to *Parsifal*, the opera for which Knappertsbusch was best known. To say that he understands this music is saying a lot—many don't. Most important, he doesn't back off the Prelude, isn't afraid of it, doesn't quake around it. He plays it relatively straightforwardly, which results in the natural sublimity. As with all sacred music, the holiness is inherent. It doesn't need to be drawn out; it will emerge when allowed (and sometimes even when not). Kna builds layer upon layer in an exemplary rendering.

There's more in the Westminster "Legacy" line, and still more to come in future releases. Already we have—in addition to the discs reviewed above—the young Daniel Barenboim playing Beethoven, the worthy but obscure conductor Hermann Scherchen in the Mozart *Requiem*, and the return of the practically unknown violinist Erica Morini. The compact disc, and the lives it resuscitates: how did we ever live without it?

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Salzburg 2001: Mortier's last stand

by Patrick J. Smith

This year saw the tenth and last Salzburg Festival under the artistic direction of Gerard Mortier, and the operas presented in the first part of that festival gave a reasonable picture of the strengths and weaknesses of Mortier's reign. A firebrand young opera intendant (in Brussels) of uncompromising avant-garde principles, he was hired by the Salzburg Festival management in order to move away from, if not obliterate, the image of the Herbert von Karajan years: the big star performances (allied to almost a trade show for record companies) at high prices for affluent continentals.

The task was Sisyphean, given the implacable opposition of many ticket buyers, the Salzburg gentry, much of the management, and the Viennese press, but it must be said that Mortier succeeded to a surprising extent, through noisy confrontations and adroit backstage maneuvers—plus the stalwart support of American backers such as Betty Freeman and Alberto Vilar.

Mortier has always been more of an ideologue than an impresario, and his Jesuit upbringing gave him an unblinking view of his role as the bringer of art to the public. He sees art in terms of education and moral imperative. He has little use for prettification through genre or folk methods and little use for the concept of art as entertainment. Mortier's aim is to take major works of art and reinterpret them in today's terms: to force audiences to confront those works as if they were newly written. During his years in Brussels, he never gave an opera by Puccini, whose entire body of work he sees as symbolic of the type of "entertainment" to be avoided. In his years in Salzburg, he similarly avoided not only that composer but also the type of "star" artist—read Luciano Pavarotti—who would detract from the primacy of artistic purpose of the festival.

It must be allowed that, in the ten years of operatic production, Mortier did pinpoint some important later twentieth-century operas, notably Olivier Messiaen's tableau-work *Saint François d'Assise* and Gyorgy Ligeti's powerful *Le Grand Macabre*. He has been, however, less successful with new operas. (Kaija Saariaho's *L'Amour de Loin*, seen in 2000, is an exception: it received very positive press and will be performed in 2002 in Santa Fe.) Mortier's plan to present two new operas in his final year was nixed by the festival board, supposedly for monetary reasons, but the fact is that by the end of his reign Mortier was pretty well isolated. His response supposedly came in the last new production: a savaging of that beloved Viennese confection, *Die Fledermaus*.

In his final communication to the public ("*Ombra Felice*"), Mortier made a bit more clear what everyone already knew: that he was intent upon negating not only the Karajan influence on the festival, but also a good deal of that of two of its founders, Hugo von Hofmannsthal and Richard Strauss. I would guess that one of Hofmannsthal's aphorisms, "Depth is hidden.

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Where? On the surface," is not to Mortier's taste. Neither are Strauss's operas. In "*Ombra Felice*," Mortier wrote: "The Feldmarschallin [in *Der Rosenkavalier*] is the most repulsive female character in opera literature"—a statement that should be read both in its artistic and political contexts.

Mortier also defended himself vigorously against the charge that his Mozart productions have largely been failures. Mozart, of course, was the festival's *raison d'être*, and the Mozart theme park that is Salzburg (incongruously a city that had no use for him and that he disliked) is dependent in part on the Mozartness of the festival. The objections center around what could broadly be termed the deconstruction of Mozart onstage; it might be commonplace in German opera houses but is heretical in Salzburg. Mortier's response was to become even more intransigent: this year the season's brochure featured grotesque photographs (by François Nars) to illustrate each opera. That for *Così fan tutte*, which graces the poster in front of the opera house as well, features two young African-Americans—one a boy, in white girl's frocks and lace gloves—holding hands and sticking their tongues out at the camera. (Unsurprisingly, the brochure sent to the American Friends of the Salzburg Festival showed only tourist photographs of picturesque Salzburg!)

Mortier's cause was actually furthered by the collapse of the classical record market, which largely eliminated the trade show aspect of the festival. His feuds with various conductors (e.g., Riccardo Muti and Claudio Abbado) and the Vienna Philharmonic provided much good copy, but essentially Mortier in his final year had been backed into a corner by the combined forces against him. Long ago he was forced to yield on including the Easter Festival's opera in the summer program—the Easter Festival is outside his jurisdiction and is controlled by the Karajan faithful, notably his widow Eliette. To what extent it will make a comeback under the new administration of Peter Ruzicka is unknown.

I have not seen enough of the productions of Mortier's tenure to comment in general, but I can say that those productions that have been successful both artistically and from a box-office point of view have succeeded because of raw talent. Whatever the excesses and mistakes of Peter Sellars, his undoubted stage sense and his uniqueness of vision grant commensurate rewards, and the same could be said of the very stage-wise Patrice Chéreau (he of the centennial *Ring* cycle at Bayreuth). Unfortunately, many of the festival productions were in the hands of hotshots who might be outrageous and "novel," but who were fully prisoners of the "concept" idea of opera production, according to which performing the opera as composer and librettist intended is strictly *verboten*; another way, a sort of "parallel universe," has to be found and explored to the ultimate. "Concept" productions had some early fruitful results, but as the genre matured the "explorations" had to be carried further and further afield, with less and less connection to the original and less and less originality. Today, these productions, in their posturings, are not so much illuminative as solipsistic.

I heard four operas in Salzburg—*Le Nozze di Figaro*, Verdi's *Falstaff*, Janáček's *Jenufa* and Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. All belong on the festival program: two are undoubted masterpieces of the operatic literature, and the other two deserve to be. Janáček's early opera is a genre work of great power, with a heart-catching (if somewhat implausible) finale in which Janáček, solely through his music, persuades you that a marriage is right and will last. The more I hear the Shostakovich, the more I realize its stature as a major twentieth-century work and can only mourn that his idea of writing a trilogy of operas on such themes was crushed with the infamous *Pravda* editorial consigning *Lady Macbeth* to Siberia. *Lady Macbeth*, as a work of art, is superior to all of Prokofiev's operas, *War and Peace* included.

Yet all four Salzburg productions were irredeemably flawed: two because of the

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"concepts" forced on the operas by two of Mortier's favorite house directors, Peter Mussbach (*Lady Macbeth*) and Cristoph Marthaler (*Figaro*), and two because of the directors' unfamiliarity with the operatic stage, Bob Swaim (*Jenufa*) and Declan Donnellan (*Falstaff*). Swaim is an American filmmaker of some renown, but he was lost onstage in the Felsenreitschule (admittedly, a difficult venue that can only be "solved" by a stage-wise director like Sellars), so that his singers were largely left to their own devices. Donnellan, a theater director, had, I assume, never confronted the demands of such a ridiculous stage as that of the Karajan-inspired "Cinemascope" Grosses Festspielhaus. He came up with some good ideas (a superlong banquet table for the fugal finale of the opera—an idea he proceeded to ruin by ending the fugue—Verdi's farewell—in a food fight), but a general clumsiness was evident throughout the evening, allied to the lame idea of turning the comic opera into a farce (the food fight, again).

The Marthaler *Figaro* was a generally dispiriting affair, conducted prosaically by Sylvain Cambreling, a favorite of Mortier's but disliked by the Salzburg audience. The "concept" focused on the wedding, or weddings, which though featured in the title of the opera are clearly tertiary to the other goings-on of that "crazy day." We are in the dressing room of a wedding shop, with a marriage license bureau in the background (people in wedding attire coming in and out upstaging those singing) and two vitrines of wedding clothes on either side. All sorts of stage nonsense takes place, with Marthaler having his private jokes as well: the first-act chair—one of the most important props in opera—in which Cherubino is hidden and behind which the count crouches is in this incarnation a motorized BarcaLounger. But (aha!) Marthaler presents the chair and then does not use it; Cherubino "hides" (almost in plain sight) behind the step stool used for fitting dresses. Marthaler has also monkeyed with the recitatives, recasting them for farcical purposes on other instruments, including a synthesizer, operated by a louche stage figure (Jürg Kienberger). He even interpolated some music in the fourth act by rubbing glasses on a tray. This to the great displeasure of the audience, who nevertheless cheered at the end.

It has always been a mystery to me why none of these "concept" directors have taken the next step and changed or added music, as appropriate. Certainly in a wedding concept of *Figaro*, we could have had a little Mendelssohn or Wagner. And the parallel universe analogy should allow for a change in the text to conform to the stage picture—after all, it is idiotic to read (in German and English) that Cherubino hid in the chair when patently he did not. But these are minor matters to one intent on showing Cherubino luxuriously sniffing the crotch of the countess's pantyhose, or having a lectern downstage where the count can declaim to the audience, or staging "Crudel! Perché finora" as a tango. Some of Marthaler's best ideas, it must also be said, were stolen direct from Sellars's famed "Trump Tower" production—including the powerful footlights cross of the countess to the count before "Contessa, perdono."

One besetting sin of opera stagings in Germany—a sort of dour gray seriousness of purpose—was in evidence in Mussbach's version of Shostakovich's tale of a bored Russian housewife. The score—marvelously played by the Vienna Philharmonic under Valery Gergiev—glitters with colors and musical variety, and this is reflected in the story. There is indeed a Zeitgeist, and it is reinforced by the shoehorning of farce with grimness, so much a feature of the twentieth century. (It is also reflected in another opera from the same period, Berg's *Lulu*.) Though Gergiev and his orchestra reveled in the colors provided by the composer, Mussbach ignored them, settling for a unit set of three arches (what did this have to do with anything?), a dogged perverseness of vision (when Sergei is put into the cellar, Mussbach has him hoisted into the flies on

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a harness), and an overall grayness that vitiates the shattering contrast of the last scene—prisoners on the road to Siberia—which *is* grim. Larissa Schevchenko, who sang the title role, has a strong enough voice, but not one iota of sexuality in her frame, which worked against belief (and paradoxically evoked not "concept" opera, but the grand old days when voice alone mattered).

In fact, much of the pleasure of the four operas came from exactly this: good old-fashioned opera stars singing. Karita Mattila is one of the handful of genuine divas singing today, and her shaping of Jenufa—though she is almost too mature for it—was masterly, working up inevitably to that final scene with Laca (which Jerry Hadley, who *is* too mature, sang with unvarying loudness). Bryn Terfel, similarly one of the handful of genuine star bassos, dominated (quite properly) Verdi's opera, though Donnellan's nineteenth-century take on it reduced the fat knight to a sort of Colonel Blimp figure surrounded by Keystone Kops. I also have never heard a *Nozze di Figaro* in which the best singing was done by the Count Almaviva. Peter Mattei is an important Mozartean; he delivered the notoriously difficult "Vedró, mentr'io sospiro" with aplomb and command. And Christine Schäfer brought the house down with her punk Cherubino.

Several points were common to all these productions. The approach is basically humorless, even in a great comedy like *Figaro*, as if laughter were an alien element. Humanistic comedy is sacrificed to farce. *Falstaff* suffered from this narrowing of focus, abetted by the coarse conducting of Lorin Maazel. Secondly, there was a pervasive attempt to get away from any specifics of time and place, even when the libretto demands it. This is central: a moving toward abstraction, in order, I assume, to achieve a universality of experience, but which invariably dissipates emotion. The second act of *Jenufa* is a good example: a detailed inner scene in winter, making the murder of the child—pushed through the river ice—all the more harrowing. Here we had an impersonal single room, framed in a lit proscenium, with characters wandering to and fro as if the temperature were the same within and without. When the wind blows a window open at the end of the act—a supposedly startling event, which is both immediate and metaphoric—we get a light show, which is essentially meaningless. Similarly, the last scene of *Lady Macbeth* calls for a clear separation of the men and women prisoners (the action requires a distinction of the two) and two deaths: a murder by drowning and a drowning. Mussbach plays the scene as one lump of prisoners, no river, no drowning—just two anonymous life exits. The feel of the plight of those shuffling to oblivion is utterly lost.

Finally, and most important, there was a complete lack of humanity in these "parallel universe" productions—either an ahumanity or an anti-humanity. Those that appear onstage are intellectual constructs operating as pieces on a chessboard rather than as human beings made of flesh. Because of this, satisfaction must come from the belaboration of the "concept" rather than from an empathy with the characters' plights. The humanity that pervaded, for example, Sellars's production of *St. François*—in particular the scene with the leper—is rarely to be found in continental directors, who shy away from it as a form of sentimentality. The temptation is to interpret this in a wider context: a drawing back from emotion of any personal sort because of the earlier events in Germany. The Amfortas's wound caused by Hitler is too painful when the grail of humanity is uncovered: therefore it must be evaded through artifice and intellectualism.

What the Salzburg Festival needs, post-Mortier, is a healthy dose of certain kinds of reality from which it has been starved. Were David Belasco still alive, he should be dispatched forthwith, to bring in the smell and feel of a real, not an abstract, environment. What the festival will get is Peter Ruzicka, an avant-garde composer who ran the Munich Festival. He has indicated he will

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produce a cycle of Richard Strauss operas, as well as those by such lesser Austrian twentieth-century composers as Alexander Zemlinsky and Franz Schreker. And next season there will be a production of Puccini's *Turandot*, with a new ending composed by Luciano Berio.

Opera note

Der Kaiser von Atlantis, by Viktor Ullmann, at the Cincinnati May Festival.

Among the more inspiring musical revelations of recent years has been the rediscovery of so-called *entartete Musik* ("degenerate music"), the works of composers banned by the Nazis. An exhibit in Düsseldorf in 1988, commemorating one mounted fifty years before by the Nazis was the revival's catalyst. Shortly thereafter, the Decca Record Company began a series of recordings, and now the term *entartete Musik* has become an artistic badge of honor, as is frequently the custom these days with former terms of abuse.

In 1994, Decca released a recording of an opera titled *Der Kaiser von Atlantis,* a blatantly political fantasia in which a mad emperor (the kaiser of the title) attempts to wage total war, an act that infuriates a personified death, who then ironically thwarts the emperor's plans. The composer was Viktor Ullmann, a Czech Jew, who though by no means among the most famous musicians of his era, was nonetheless a known and respected figure. Michael H. Kater, in *The Twisted Muse,* an essential book on composers and the Third Reich, wrote of Ullmann that "No one has served as a finer symbol of the pride and suffering of these Jewish musicians." A disciple of Schoenberg, Ullmann was both a prolific composer and a respected conductor, but, after the Nazi seizure of Czechoslovakia, he became subject to brutal racial laws, and in September 1942 he was sent to Theresienstadt, the so-called Paradise Ghetto. It was there that Ullmann composed *Der Kaiser von Atlantis,* to a libretto written by a fellow prisoner, the young poet and painter Peter Kien. In the fall of 1944, Ullmann was sent to Auschwitz and gassed; Kien soon followed. Their opera was luckier. It had its premiere, in Amsterdam, in 1975 and has subsequently been produced in San Francisco, New York, and London (at the Imperial War Museum, no less). It was also among the main attractions at this year's May Festival in Cincinnati, as sure a sign as any of a work's coming-of-age.

The May Festival is among this country's most venerable music events, dating from 1873 and counting Theodore Thomas, later the legendary founding conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, as its first music director. The May Festival's concerts are primarily choral and over the years have featured a veritable Who's Who of starry soloists—everyone from Ernestine Schumann-Heink to Kathleen Battle. Most of the festival's events are held in Cincinnati's Music Hall, a grand Victorian pile dedicated in 1878 that looks like a cross between a train station and a large church. But *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* was performed a few blocks away at the Isaac M. Wise (Plum Street) Temple, an opulent vintage synagogue.

The program on May 20 opened with a selection of Holocaust-era songs in Hebrew and Yiddish, but these were mere curtain raisers and in some ways distracted from the concentrated, unsentimental power of Ullmann and Kien's work. In an effort to give the opera broader appeal, it was sung in English, rather than the original German. The decision was probably the right one, as Kien's libretto is more significant for its point than its poetry. James Conlon, the May Festival's music director since 1979, also served as the de facto director of a semi-staged performance. Though inherently limited, the semi-staging gave the drama a certain immediacy. (It was most strained at the opening, when what must have been Hitler's voice boomed, *auf Deutsch*, over an amplification system—an unnecessary flourish.) Once things got

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moving, Conlon had the good sense to allow the one-act opera to speak mostly for itself. Its resigned and comforting message—that death, though inevitable, should not be the province of man—was conveyed with great conviction by a committed and characterful cast.

As the Kaiser, the baritone Donnie Ray Albert offered an arresting combination of bluster and conflict. In his Emperor Jones getup (a white tunic, burgundy sash, and gaudy epaulets), the singer resembled Paul Robeson, an impression furthered by his resonant singing. He found a fine foil in the Icelandic bass-baritone Kristinn Sigmundsson, who sang Death richly and with surprisingly crisp diction. Though this opera hardly seemed a place for jokes, one of the evening's highlights was a frustrated Death exclaiming, "I used to be somebody once!" In lesser roles, the mezzo-soprano Paula Rasmussen sang some piercing high notes, and the tenor John Aler (who holds the record for the most May Festival appearances by a male singer) was in good, strong voice as the Harlequin. To the role of the Soldier, the tenor Stanford Olsen brought a tender and lambent tone. And though Jennifer Ringo (a soprano who is also Mrs. Conlon) sometimes sounded tremulous as the Young Girl, she handled her high-flying passages well. The bass-baritone John Cheek sang the role of the Loudspeaker, a kind of off-stage narrator, in German-accented English. His voice, unlike the rest of the cast, was amplified, but this was actually an apt, veristic touch. By contrast, the decision to have Cheek wear a yellow Star of David when taking his bows was not only confusing, but also heavy-handed and in poor taste.

Musically, *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* owes more than a little to Weill's cabaret-inflected style, an effect furthered by Ullmann's scoring his opera for small ensemble—a result of the privations of concentration-camp life. On this occasion, Conlon robustly conducted members of the Cincinnati Symphony, all of whom played with evident enthusiasm.

Conlon did his audience a welcome service by introducing them to a work still infrequently performed. Of course, some of the power possessed by *Der Kaiser von Atlantis* derives from its novelty. But discovering music born of tragedy always holds special appeal. It somehow seems more real because of the suffering involved in its creation. Ullmann and Kien suffered not for this work specifically, but rather because of who they were. Decency alone requires that we now listen to what they had to say. But more important than listening is *hearing*.

—David Mermelstein

Editor's note: We wish to call our readers' attention to the publication of *How Charlie Shavers Died and Other Poems*, by Harvey Shapiro (Wesleyan University Press, $12.95), portions of which first appeared in *The New Criterion*.

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The media

Bring back the duel!

by James Bowman

As is well known, members of Parliaments with rules derived from those of the mother of Parliaments are forbidden from using the word "liar" or "lie" to refer to other members or their remarks. You can see why this rule is a necessary one. The charge that someone is lacking in good faith poisons the wells of debate in a system that is founded on debate. It invites a retort in kind which at once drains the system of substance and renders the parliamentary process trivial. The deliberations of our own dear legislature have been trivialized and drained of substance for other reasons, however, which unhappy fact throws most if not all of our substantive political debate into the press—where charges of lying made by political adversaries against each other now seem to have become almost routine.

Of course, it is easy to lose one's head in the heat of political strife, but what are we to think of those who, with every opportunity for reflection and the moderation of passion, accuse their political opponents of lying in cold print—which affords slanderers and calumniators a certain amount of protection? But then, the words "lying," "lie," and "liar" nowadays hardly seem to carry the kick they did in the days when violence was likely to accompany their deployment. This must partly be a result of the crudeness and vulgarity of the media culture that I discussed in this space last month. Every time someone—like, say, Gary Condit—is unresponsive to press inquiries about the most intimate details of his private life, he is accused of "lying."

As I argued then, it is nonsense for the media to pretend that any public man who does not open up his private life to the scrutiny of any idle curiosity seeker is a liar. But so far have we accepted media values that someone like Representative Condit does not even have the spirit to resent the slander. Hence the ridiculous spectacle of his offering his throat to the media hounds on nationwide television and then refusing to answer their questions, as charmingly put to him by Miss Connie Chung. Naturally, he was torn to pieces. Why did he submit to such an interview unless he had already acquiesced in the right of the media to know all there was to know about him? And having accepted that he had forfeited his "zone of privacy," where did he think he was going to get the standing to reassert it on the air? What he may or may not have got up to with Chandra Levy will probably never be known, but it is beyond dispute that he hadn't the wit or the courage or the self-possession to defend his own honor in public. I wonder how many of our congressmen and senators would have had these qualities in his position?

You don't have to wish for a return to dueling to recognize that, if the accusation of bad faith is not vigorously—though perhaps not always violently—resented, it will be made more and more often. And this is just what has happened as the public has

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grown used to the fact that neither the elder George Bush nor Bill Clinton nor their many spokesmen really seemed to mean what he said anyway. Hadn't Bush, after all, broken his promise not to raise taxes after having made it the centerpiece of his electoral appeal in 1988? Didn't Clinton say on national television: "I did not have sex with that woman"? Naturally enough, when lying itself becomes standard operating procedure, so will the accusation of lying.

Though politicians themselves, who still have to meet each other every day, may still be relatively shy of it, there is no evident journalistic inhibition against promiscuous accusations of knowing falsehood being brought against one's political opponents. Last May *The New Republic*, still editorially grumpy because Al Gore isn't president, ran a cover with a picture of George W. Bush labelled: "He's Lying." What he was allegedly lying about, said Paul Krugman and Jonathan Chait inside, were budget projections made for the ten years to come that purported to show that there would be, given the projections' assumptions about economic growth, plenty of surplus tax dollars coming into the treasury to "pay for" the Bush tax cuts, then being debated (and subsequently passed) in Congress.

If *The New Republic* had confined itself to observing that the administration's projecting the amount of tax receipts to the treasury in 2011 was a laughably inexact exercise, there could have been no objection. But Krugman, a professor of economics at Princeton and a columnist for *The New York Times*, insisted that "The fiscal predictions that enable Bush to pay for his tax cut and contingency fund are not mere errors but deliberate efforts to deceive the public." Harsh words! But Krugman learned intellectual street fighting at Princeton, where passions obviously run higher than they do in Washington. Professor Krugman proceeded to demonstrate what would be the fiscally terrifying result of having made the same projections "with proper accounting," but for the charge of bad faith made against the President of the United States he offers no evidence beyond the fact that he doesn't agree with Professor Krugman.

Likewise, Mr. Chait, a senior editor of the magazine, notes that "the debate over the Bush tax cut has been shrouded in a fog of cant and untruth"—all of it, presumably, emanating from one side. Unlike Professor Krugman, however, he has what he considers to be evidence of prevarication and not just bad economics. It is this. In a leaked memo from the Republican leadership in Congress that sought supporters for the tax cut for a televised rally, he found the following: "[T]he Speaker's office was very clear in saying that they do not need people in suits. If people want to participate—AND WE DO NEED BODIES—they must be DRESSED DOWN, appear to be REAL WORKER types, etc. We plan to have hard hats for people to wear. Other groups are providing waiters/waitresses, and other types of workers."

QED! "If the advocates of the Bush tax cut were honest, a memo like this would not exist," he solemnly informed his readers. By this standard of honesty, the former vice president must be branded a liar for combing over his bald spot. But his doughty partisans at *The New Republic*, no longer in any danger of being called to the field of honor to defend their calumnies with their lives, must think that such pathetic scrounging of material for character assassination all just part of the cut-and-thrust of political debate in the postmodern era. In the rest of his piece, Mr. Chait is full of information about what the Republicans must "really" intend by such obviously misguided policy prescriptions, but his quiver of proofs that their "lies" are deliberate and culpable is otherwise empty.

Shocking as the charge that the president was lying may once have been, *The New Republic*'s sensational discovery produced little reaction from the rest of the press. It might almost seem that, in the era of news-as-entertainment, the public just doesn't care if its elected officials are trustworthy or not. Perhaps those ordinary "workers" that

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the Republican fat cats so wickedly impersonated have at last come to accept what those who move in the most exclusive postmodern circles have been telling us for a long time, namely that "truth" is a chimera anyway. That, at least, is one way of explaining to ourselves the late summer saga (or farce) of the appropriately named "trust funds" belonging to social security and Medicare.

They are appropriately named because they require trust to believe in them, though they do not in fact exist by most definitions of what a trust fund is. They are not, that is to say, an income-producing account consisting of stocks, bonds, or interest-bearing deposits, or some combination of all three. The alleged social security trust fund is simply the current account receipts from the FICA tax out of which current social security benefits may, if you choose to look at it in this way, be paid. It is a strictly notional "fund" because there is no practical difference between the receipts of the social security tax and general tax revenues. As a collaborative exercise in demagoguery Republicans and Democrats got together at the beginning of the era of budget surpluses to require that the social security tax receipts should be regarded as if they were in a "lock box" from which those notional wads of cash could only be taken in order to pay social security benefits and nothing else.

How this would help either social security beneficiaries or the fiscal health of the nation must be supposed to have been as obscure to the framers of this foolish statute as to everybody else, but what it certainly did was to create a kind of suicide pact of the two parties, an agreement by Republicans to allow a portion of tax revenues to be held hostage rather than to be given back in tax relief and by Democrats to restrain spending, lest either side open itself to the charge of robbing the elderly and infirm—a charge that, though acknowledged by everyone to be untrue, is equally acknowledged to be unanswerable and politically fatal. The press plays along with the same charade because it adds to the thrill of political combat that such a super-weapon may be employed at any moment.

In the meantime, we must make do with that rusty old dueling pistol, the lately trivial charge of bad faith. And whom should we find deploying it most assiduously from his perch on the op-ed page of *The New York Times* but our passionate friend, Professor Krugman, sounding even more than the other *Times* columnists as if he were on salary from the DNC. Again and again he could be found over the course of the summer firing at the Republicans charges of immorality that Dick Gephardt or Tom Daschle would blush to make. In a column of August 24 headed "Pants on Fire," for example, he pretends to write an open letter to Mitch Daniels, the head of the Office of Management and Budget:

> I have a suggestion. It's dishonest and irresponsible . . . but I suspect that doesn't bother you. And it would help you squirm out of a problem that we both know isn't going away.
>
> True, your bobbing and weaving have been impressive. Some people have actually bought your line that the surplus has vanished because of Congressional big spending.

He goes on to make a tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Daniels announce that the defense budget is part of social security—which, he says is "just an expanded version of your administration's Medicare scam." As a witness he calls an IMF report that said, "basically," he avers, "liar, liar, pants on fire" to the Bush budget numbers. On his own responsibility he refers to "blatantly dishonest accounting," designed to provide "big tax cuts to the very, very affluent." This is a view that he continually repeats for several columns on the same subject, frequently adding along the way snide attempts at irony that look as if they were intended to be subtle but somehow went horribly wrong—like "Let me pretend for a moment that the truth matters" or "Dishonesty in the pursuit of tax cuts is no vice. That, in the end, will be the only way to defend George W. Bush's deceptions." In another column, he writes:

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> After all, a recent study by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that the revenue lost because of the Bush tax cut will be more than twice the sum needed to secure social security without any reform at all for the next 75 years. The administration tried to refute that calculation, playing its usual game of statistical three-card monte—"Look, honey, I just found $4 billion under the cushion, and 60 lines of stem cells too!". . . but the center's estimate matches those of the I.M.F. and other independent organizations.

I don't know much about card-swindles, but I don't believe that three-card monte consists of lifting up seat cushions and finding things that aren't there. What, exactly, then, was this bit of dishonesty he says was involved in the administration's attempt to "refute" the Democratic think tank's calculation of the effects of the tax cut? Krugman doesn't say, expecting us to take the charge on faith—his own (good) rather than Bush's (bad). This is odd coming from a man who elsewhere asserts that the charge of lying brought against the president was "a simple statement of fact." Admittedly, from that quarter such a charge is hardly remarkable, but the point is that it should be. An accusation of dishonesty is not something to be made lightly, or without factual (rather than interpretative) documentation in support of it.

It's not even as if both honesty and temperance of language are that difficult in this case. There are good arguments to be made on each side, and a genuinely—that is to say honestly—objective commentator could make them without having recourse to any bad or dishonest ones. But the central truth is that the Mexican standoff over the "lock box" is itself a piece of dishonesty—and, apparently, an unassailable one—whose enshrinement in the center of the political process requires both sides to flirt with complementary dishonesties. The Democrats blame the threat to the surplus on Bush's "tax cuts for the rich," though as they know that rescinding the tax cut would be divisive within the Democratic caucus and unpopular with the public, they don't propose it. Better to get the political advantage from abusing a measure without incurring the political disadvantage of actually doing anything about it.

Bush attempts to play the economic Keynesian, arguing for the stimulative properties of the tax cut, but only when it suits him. His answer to the Democrats' charge of having "lost" the surplus with his tax cuts is to argue forcefully in reply that the "real" threat to the economy is not the tax cut but excessive Democratic spending and that he actually welcomes the diminishment or even disappearance of the surplus as a means of keeping a check on spending. Meanwhile, he joins in the game of making a shibboleth of the surplus that is, in Keynesian terms, sheer madness and one of the mistakes that deepened the Great Depression. A government surplus represents money taken out of the economy at a time when monetary loosening to stimulate growth is the order of the day everywhere else.

None of this is exactly dishonest. Whether you regard the threat to the "lock box" as issuing from tax cuts or from spending is all in how you look at it. It is the idea of the "lock box" itself as anything other than a means of buying up government debt that is dishonest. As Alan Reynolds put it in *National Review Online*, "it certainly does not matter whether bondholders are paid off with excess payroll or excess income taxes." It may be good that, in a time of surplus, government debt should be bought up, but no one would suppose that the surplus should be preserved artificially for that purpose, even at the cost of fiscal tightening in the teeth of a threatened recession, if it weren't for the false metaphor of the "lock box" and the political uses to which both sides think they can put it.

But this is a very special kind of dishonesty—one that became particularly popular in the Clinton years when the media's tacit acceptance of the dissevering of rhetoric from action was confirmed with its failure

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to protest against the obvious humbug of Clinton's assurance that he could "feel your pain." Accept that and you can go on to accept that Clinton himself believed that he was telling the truth when he said he had not had sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky. From there it is easy to accept without comment the Democrats' charge that the administration was not "protecting our seniors"—as if anything less than a $160 billion surplus would result in decreased social security or Medicare benefits to current recipients, whose benefit levels are mandated by law.

All this is sheer demagoguery of course, but it is now the custom of the country. On the Republican side, the demagoguery is also a form of self-contradiction. It is not necessarily, or not culpably, self-contradictory to argue that the fiscal stimulus of tax-cutting will produce more benefits than the fiscal stimulus of increasing spending, but Bush does not make that argument, instead hoping (presumably) that the contradiction will be too difficult for ordinary folk to understand anyway. He may well be right, but if so he counsels despair. Clinton's treatment of the political debate was always completely cynical, and he never made much effort to raise the intellectual level of his political rhetoric to the point of coherence (remember that "bridge to the twenty-first century"?), perhaps calculating (surely rightly) that he had the intellectuals in his corner anyway.

Bush the Younger, in attempting to emulate his predecessor, obviously cannot rely on the acquiescence of the professoriat. Determined not to make the mistake of his father—or at least the mistake his father made of being out-humbugged in 1992— he has tacitly accepted what was already de facto reality among the Democrats and the media, namely that real, serious political debate in this country is no more. Thus the media swallowed without a peep the "arsenic in drinking water" charge by the Democrats, though they knew that it was another bit of shameless demagoguery. They certainly wouldn't want to appear "biased" by pointing the fact out, yet not to point it out could hardly be consistent with honesty, at least as honesty has traditionally been understood.

The habit of impugning one's political opponent's good faith was perhaps made easier by the habit on the left, which is now even more common among the apolitical but bien pensant who describe themselves as "moderates," of impugning the "compassion" of fiscal conservatives because of their tendency to be less generous with other people's money, if not with their own. Now fiscal conservatism, since the Clinton era, has been somewhat rehabilitated. But the "compassion" of social conservatives—for example, on behalf of homosexual partners who are not allowed to marry each other —is still freely questioned, and few non-conservative voices are ever raised in protest. Of course it didn't help that George W. Bush saw this calumny as an opportunity to advertise himself as a "compassionate conservative"—as if admitting the charge made against the conservatives before him.

But there is a difference even between this insult and one of dishonesty. In fact, the worst humbugs are the most honest: they really believe that they feel the pain of the unfortunate, and that this gives them a better claim to knowing what to do on their behalf. Arguably, it is even fair fighting for liberals to call conservatives uncompassionate, just as it is for conservatives to call liberals profligate, though both would presumably deny the charge. But it can never be fair to accuse someone of dishonesty unless the purpose of doing so is to have him expelled from the fora of civilized discourse. But then, that may well be what the likes of Paul Krugman want to happen to conservatives.

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Books

A fable for our time

by Stephen Schwartz

The Cathars are fashionable these days. This movement of allegedly heretical Christian peasants and minor nobility drew the attention of suspicious religious authorities from the mid-twelfth to the mid-fourteenth centuries in the eastern Mediterranean lands of Languedoc, Catalonia, and Lombardy. They and the successful inquisitorial campaign against them have generated three new books in English and the expanded reissue of a classic volume on the Gnostic and dualistic doctrines ascribed to them.

The more that is published about the Albigensians—as the Cathars are also known—however, the less seems to be reliably known of them, and that is a problem for serious students. All that can firmly be stated is that bloody crusades were conducted against a supposed heresy, and that a large quantity of documentation assembled by their inquisitors is the only resource we have for study. Most of this information was extracted under duress, and it would seem obvious that discussions of the Albigensians based on such sources should be no more reliable than, say, a chronicle of Bolshevism derived from the confessions recited in the Moscow Trials or a history of the German Jews based on Nazi propaganda.

Were the Albigensians dualists, that is, proponents of a universe inhabited by two nearly equal forces—Good and Evil, God and Satan—eternally locked in a conflict to which humanity is a mere spectator? Did they represent a revival of Gnosticism, the religious movement that so influenced the Near East in the early Christian centuries? Were they antinomians who believed that life groans under the usurping authority of evil, and that resistance to established religious doctrine is, in fact, true morality? Were they connected with allegedly heretical, ostensibly dualist phenomena in Balkan Christendom—the Bulgarian Bogomils and the mysterious Bosnian Church?

Any serious discussion of the Albigensians must unfortunately begin with the recognition that none of these four seemingly essential questions can be definitively answered. In the absence of historical documents showing what the Albigensians thought and believed, writing about them in recent years has proceeded in two opposed and, it seems to me, equally problematical directions. On the one hand, books pullulate with fanciful imaginings, some of them clearly intended for the lower end of the mysticism market. On the other, volumes appear offering extensive descriptions of daily life in Languedoc, but telling us very little about the broader reality of the Albigensians and the crusades against them.

Stephen O'Shea's *The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Death of the Albigensians*[1] exemplifies the first approach. Although there are no primary source materi-

1 *The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Death of the Albigensians*, by Stephen O'Shea; Walker & Co., 224 pages, $25.

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als by Cathar adherents, this book is written in an active voice, with an affirmative attitude redolent of certitude. He portrays the Albigensians as they were perceived by their persecutors, but in more vivid detail.

For example, near the beginning of his narrative, O'Shea depicts a meeting in the village of St. Félix de Caraman in May, 1167, of "dualist grandees—heresiarchs—from distant lands . . . gathered . . . to talk openly, without fear . . . at a great conclave in the castle of a local noble." The townspeople, we are told, "no doubt greeted the robed heresiarchs by bowing deeply and reciting a prayer . . . known as the *melioramentum* [which] marked the supplicants as believers in the Cathar message." Further, the visitors to St. Félix were "living saints . . . equal in stature . . . to Jesus' apostles." There follows a description of this subversive assembly, which included a certain Nicetas, "whose identity has never been fully established, [but] most probably the bishop of Constantinople for the Bogomil faith."

Such deliberate ambiguities mask the unfortunate fact that this and other narratives like it fly under false colors. This is not history, not even a popularization of history; it is fiction, but of a special kind. Rather than composing a novelistic tale derived from established historical events and personages, O'Shea has fabricated an "historical" text based in great part on barely known and dimly perceived legends, beliefs, and accusations, filtered through secondary, tertiary, and even more remote sources. O'Shea's book is profusely footnoted. But when we consult the notes for the vignette above we find that the only record of the St. Félix assembly was composed in the seventeenth century, or a half millennium after the fact, supposedly from a lost document of 1223. The details of ritual and belief are unsourced, aside from a reference to a doctoral dissertation, a full entry for which is missing from the "selected bibliography."

According to the body of inquisitorial accusations and creative interpretations on which O'Shea has drawn, thousands of Christian peasants in Languedoc had committed themselves to a radical reinterpretation of their faith. They embraced dualism and antinomianism, professing that Satan had equal power with God and that the material world, including the church hierarchy, was ruled by the Evil One. Further, their theory of creation identified Satan with the God of the Old Testament—which scripture they rejected. In an additional Gnostic shading, they wavered between rejecting the physicality of Jesus and merely denying the reality of his Passion, claiming that human incarnation of the divine was impossible. The dualist or Manichaean and Gnostic elements of the Albigensian heresy are conceived as having survived in some underground form through hundreds of years from the first Christian centuries and to have arrived in Languedoc from across a relatively immense geographical reach since the traditional area of influence of the religion of Mani and the Gnostic sects was Persia.

Two other presumptive aspects of Catharism must be mentioned. The first is the purported adoption of extremely ascetic habits; the Albigensians are said to have sworn off all the activities associated with the material world, including sexual intercourse, marriage, procreation, and the consumption of meat. The second is the development of rituals, above all the so-called *endura*, or fasting on one's deathbed, and the *consolamentum* or initiation into elite or "perfect" ranking.

In fact, the lack of information makes the Albigensians the "perfect" topic for historical writing in a period like our own, when traditional rules of inquiry into the past have been, to a considerable degree, abandoned. An academic historical cadre that has surrendered itself to such overriding interests as homosexuality among pirates or the defense of American Communism as an indigenous, patriotic phenomenon will have no problem accepting the existence, without adequate documentation, of a medieval heresy. By a most peculiar irony, academics who believe the American Communists were falsely accused of treason readily em-

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brace the charges advanced by inquisitors six-hundred years ago.

All these habits of mind on display in the trade version of O'Shea are equally visible in the work of Malcolm Barber, a professor of history at the University of Reading, whose volume[2] appears in a series for use in schools. Both authors are on considerably firmer ground when they take up the crusades launched against the purported heretics and the accompanying wars between religious authorities and nobles. It is beyond argument that in 1208 a papal representative, Peter of Castelnau, a Cistercian who had participated in a nonviolent campaign to reinforce church authority in Languedoc, was murdered. After several years of preaching, he had engaged in a controversy with a local lord, Raymond VI of Toulouse, whom he demanded should initiate the repression of alleged heretics in his domain. Raymond refused flatly; he, like King Peter II of Aragon, had slight interest in the harassment of his subjects on religious pretexts. Peter of Castelnau then excommunicated Raymond: the probable cause of his assassination.

Peter of Castelnau was survived by his superior in his efforts, Arnau Amalric, head of the Cistercian order. Within months of Peter of Castelnau's death, Arnau was appointed by Pope Innocent III to head a crusade against the Albigensians. There ensued two decades of chaos in Languedoc, as the crusaders sacked cities, wrecked castles, and tormented and burned accused offenders. In 1209, Arnau Amalric is said to have committed the one act widely recalled from the history of the crusade: in the brutal seizure of the town of Béziers, he was supposedly asked how to distinguish the loyal Christians from the heretics. He replied, "*Caedite eos. Novit enim Dominus qui sunt eius*" ("Kill all of them. God will know his own").

But the massacre at Béziers brings up yet another analytical problem in dealing with the crusade against the Albigensians. As O'Shea indicates, without clearly understanding it, Béziers, like Barcelona and other cities of the eastern Mediterranean littoral, had evolved a strong, autonomous municipal identity; its civic councilors were unwilling to bend to the demands of either aristocrats or clerics. Here is a major gap in virtually all of these studies: consideration of the probability that the Albigensian crusades had, in fact, very little to do with elusive religious differences and everything to do with rivalries between the rising towns, and the rural nobles allied with them, and a religious hierarchy avid to increase its political control and economic assets. Incredibly enough, almost none of the writers on the "Cathar phenomenon" seem to have considered this simple elucidation of the whole sequence of events, which would explain another aspect of the matter, also essentially unaddressed: the protection of the alleged heretics by local rulers of unquestioned piety, such as the Aragonese Peter II, famed for crusading against Muslims in Spain.

Why should this be? Mainly, I think, because warfare between competing feudal classes is a great deal more prosaic than legends of occult resistance to an established church. Few modern readers, aside from specialists, have much interest in the constitutional arrangements inhering to municipal powers in the late medieval period—although it should be noted that in Spain, where the tradition of local communalism remains extremely strong, such topics are a well-known feature of popular culture.

And even if we believe that the peasants of Languedoc had in fact embraced certain heterodox religious ideas, could this not also be explained by simpler and more convincing hypotheses than the survival of Asiatic theosophies, and their sudden reemergence, distant in time and place from their origins? The foundation for such a theory is the "borderland effect." Three of the European areas in which dualist and Gnostic atavisms are presumed to have thrived—Languedoc and Catalonia, Bosnia

2 *The Cathars*, by Malcolm Barber; Longman, 256 pages, $26.40.

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and Hercegovina, and Bulgaria and Macedonia—were, and to a great extent remain, classic frontier zones. The first and last stood for centuries between Christian and Muslim spheres of influence, while Bosnia and Hercegovina appeared astride the line dividing the Catholic and Orthodox dispensations, and then, like the others, at the outer wall of Christendom faced with Islamic expansion.

Borderlands are nearly always places of upheaval and ferment. Symbolic of the first part of this syndrome, we need only consider the tragedy of Catalonia in the Spanish Civil War and the dolorous appearance of Bosnia and Macedonia in more recent headlines. While the spiritual and intellectual attainments of the Balkan territories are obscure to the outer world, the cultural achievements of Catalonia, the land of Picasso, Miró, Gaudí, and Dalí, require no elaboration. What historically distinguished Languedoc and Catalonia was immense commercial power, based on the long and substantial trade between the Christian domains and Islamic Spain. Given such wealth, it may have been in some manner predictable that the burghers and nobles of the region would assert their independence. Thus, Languedoc appears as a sort of medieval California, prosperous from trade, open to foreign influences, and indeed rich and freethinking to a point where it seems to have embraced a kind of moral relativism.

Such a condition would also allow another option in explaining the Albigensian epic ignored by virtually all the more recent writers: the possibility of Muslim influence on the emergence of variant Christian practices. Basing his analysis on solid academic research, the Swiss essayist Denis de Rougemont in his pioneering *Love in the Western World* (rev. ed. 1983) marked out for a wider audience the path by which Islamic love poetry was transformed into troubadour verse. As is visible in nearly all commentaries on the Cathars, the troubadours have entered the popular understanding as the literary beneficiaries of the heretics' noble protectors.

But it is Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, whose *Montaillou* (1978) inaugurated the tradition of filling the void of sure knowledge about the Albigensians with extraordinarily detailed sociological inventories, who may have provided a foundation for the most useful theory of the origin of Cathar heterodoxies. He observed that shepherds from Montaillou functioned in a "community of culture, at once Moorish, Andalusian, Catalan, and Occitan," in which the local and migrant peasants of Languedoc "were involved at so many levels." Unlike medieval Christendom, the Islamic world of that epoch was a vast theater of esoteric discourse, ranging from the Gnostic tendencies visible in Sunni doctrine to lightly camouflaged expressions of dualism in the works of distinguished Sufis. Such Christian philosophers as the fourteenth-century Mallorcan polymath Ramón Lull expressed their admiration for the Islamic mystical classics—as did the influential kabbalistic rabbis of the Jewish communities that flourished in Languedoc contemporaneously with the troubadours. But effectively studying such phenomena requires rare—thouogh not hierophantic—knowledge and discipline and a certain sympathy for Islamic civilization.

For the ordinary reader, alongside the "occultist" volumes of O'Shea and Barber are the works like *Montaillou* that try to fill the factual vacuum with quotidian details and encyclopedic accounts of heresies. The latest example is *The Yellow Cross: The Story of the Last Cathars* by René Weis, a professor of English literature at University College, London.[3] This volume is essentially a continuation of *Montaillou*, though lacking its brilliance.

The most useful exemplar of the dictionary genre is, without doubt, the new edition of a compendious survey of dualism by the Bulgarian scholar Yuri Stoyanov which has

3 *The Yellow Cross: The Story of the Last Cathars 1290–1329*, by René Weis; Alfred A. Knopf, 400 pages, $35.

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been reissued under the title *The Other God*.[4] This work evinces so extraordinary a reach of research as to glut the reader with data, ranging to the creation myths of the most obscure Eurasian nomads, the sacred classics of the pre-Islamic Persians, and forgotten novelties of Orthodox Christian theology. While Stoyanov's volume belongs on the shelf of everyone interested in these topics, his sweep of erudition does not compensate for his sharing in the weaknesses common to his competitors: excessive confidence in the veridical nature of the account of Christian non-conformity and an indifference to Islam—the latter predictable in a scholar from a Slavic Orthodox environment.

What significance do the Cathars possess today? We can sympathize with the quest of the peasants, nobles, and urban citizens of Languedoc for autonomy, especially in the intellectual realm. But if there is a parallel for our time, it seems an ominous one: these medieval folk may have ceased to care whether Christians or Muslims ruled over them, so long as they were left to their own pursuits. In that, some may believe they were wrong. Others, however, will not concur. For myself, I am not yet ready to decide.

Ideas as anecdotes

Louis Menand The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 546 pages, $27

reviewed by Mark Bauerlein

In the early 1970s, Richard Rorty, a professor of philosophy at Princeton, decided that his discipline had reached a point of exhaustion. Although his anthology *The Linguistic Turn* (1967) was assigned in every first-year graduate seminar in the country, and his introduction had praised "linguistic philosophy" for cleansing the field of metaphysical rubbish, the activity seemed to him academic and inconsequential. At one time, philosophers had expounded wisdom and justice to a broad intellectual audience. But, by 1970, philosophers discussed counterfactual conditionals within a shrinking circle of professionals. "American philosophers' disinterest in moral and social questions became almost total," Rorty recalled (though he surely meant "uninterest.") The problems were linguistic, the solutions technical, their significance doubtful.

The renovation of philosophy, he decided, lay in a dormant school of thought: pragmatism, which he dubbed "the chief glory of our country's intellectual tradition." In William James and John Dewey, he found an outlook that skirted epistemological puzzles and forsook universals. Their mode of argument was revisionist and liberating, for they "wrote, as Nietzsche and Heidegger did not, in a spirit of social hope." In Rorty's version, pragmatists didn't refute epistemology; they ignored it. They focused on beliefs, not theory; practice, not reflection. Philosophers proposed and debated theories of truth, knowledge, and morality; pragmatists pared them down to their practical consequences. While his colleagues worried over a theory's truth, validity, coherence, and consistency, Rorty took pragmatic counsel and asked, "Does it work? What difference does it make if we act upon it?" This pragmatic turn was infectious. Rorty became a hero in literature and "studies" departments. "Neopragmatism" rose into a recognized academic sect, with Stanley Fish, Frank Lentricchia, Cornel West, and other luminaries promoting it in the pages of *Critical Inquiry* and *New Literary History*. Rorty's humane expressions—e.g., "In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right"—were a refreshing alternative to the periphrastic argot of deconstruction. His antitheoretical stance invigorated nativist scholars who were fed up with the two Jacques (Lacan and Derrida), Hélène Cixous, Louis

4 *The Other God*, by Yuri Stoyanov; Yale University Press, 476 pages, $14.95 paper.

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Althusser, and Michel Foucault. Critics out to turn the humanities into a multiculturalist project found in Rorty's pragmatists a lineage amenable to their hopes.

Philosophers didn't know how to respond. They were trained to argue cases and were ready to dispute Rorty's terms and inferences, but he charged that their mode of argument was itself a problem. His strategy was "to try to make the vocabulary in which these objections [to pragmatism] are made look bad, thereby changing the subject, rather than granting the objector his choice of weapons and terrain by meeting his criticisms head-on." This was a new forensics. To disarm his antagonists, Rorty devised a rhetoric of glib portraits and arch assertions. He practiced the homespun metaphor and the dismissive response. Instead of posing arguments in favor of skepticism, for instance, Rorty asserted that pragmatists "asked us to give up the neurotic Cartesian quest for certainty." He introduced the pragmatist theory of truth with the remark, "This theory says that truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about." He affirmed the contingency of ideas by deriding its opposite, the "Platonic urge to escape from the finitude of one's time and place." Of God's existence, Rorty echoed the pragmatists' deflection: "They just doubt that the vocabulary of theology is one we ought to be using." In sum, Rorty advanced a few anti-epistemological premises—"there is no escaping contingency," "mind is an instrument of coping, not a faculty of knowing"—with a bare insouciance and judged those who denied them as benighted and uninteresting. The ideas were set, the debate foreclosed. This was neopragmatist persuasion.

Louis Menand's sweeping chronicle of nineteenth-century intellectual life, *The Metaphysical Club*, shares Rorty's enthusiasm for the old pragmatists. Menand has elsewhere acknowledged Rorty's influence, which shows here in his treatment of thinkers and ideas. Menand's introduction to the 1997 anthology *Pragmatism: A Reader* set Rorty among the "classic pragmatists" while voicing neopragmatist slogans—e.g., "Theories are just one of the ways we make sense of our needs"—with the surety of a disciple. In this study, Menand has a higher ambition: to reconstruct the social and political worlds in which the pragmatists moved.

"The Metaphysical Club" refers to the dozen Harvard men who gathered in Cambridge after the Civil War to discuss the important intellectual topics of the time, such as Darwinism, induction, and the compatibility of science and religion. The group included the prodigy Charles Sanders Peirce, an expert in logic, probability, and cognition who impressed colleagues with beguiling, inscrutable theories of mind and matter; William James, son of the wealthy Swedenborgian Henry James, Sr., and beloved at the college though he had not yet settled upon a career; Chauncey Wright, the energizing spirit of the club, known for his strict positivism, bright conversation, and, sadly, his alcoholism and melancholy; and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., the Boston attorney, Harvard lecturer, and editor of the *American Law Review*, who was just beginning to conceive the jurisprudence that would make him one of the most famous Supreme Court Justices. At one meeting in November 1872, Peirce read a paper that contained portions of "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," essays now considered to be the first programmatic expressions of pragmatism. (Dewey, the other major figure in the book, was only thirteen years old at the time, though he did attend a Metaphysical Club at Johns Hopkins, where he heard Peirce read a paper in 1884.)

Menand's subtitle, "A Story of Ideas in America," indicates how the club members are to appear. They are idea-makers whose thoughts issue from their experience. As he announces in a Rortyan metaphor in the preface, "This book is an effort to write about these ideas in their own spirit—that is, to try to see ideas as always soaked through by the personal and social situations in which we find them." Menand fills his ac-

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count with biographical vignettes. He follows Dewey from undergraduate days at the University of Vermont (strongpost of German idealism) to graduate work at Hopkins (with the Hegelian George Morris) to the chairmanship of philosophy at Chicago (where he led a remarkable group of social scientists establishing the disciplines of education, sociology, and social psychology) to Teachers' College and the formation of the American Association of University Professors. To elucidate the conflicts Dewey faced, Menand adds segments on the Dartmouth College case, argued by Daniel Webster before the Supreme Court, which secured private colleges from government interference; Jane Addams's Hull House and the 1894 Pullman Strike, in which Dewey discerned a "thinking social organism"; and the firing of a Columbia professor for opposing the draft in World War I, which put academic freedom to the test.

Holmes, James, and Peirce receive similar profiles. We learn where they were born, how their careers progressed, whom they loved and hated. Menand isolates fascinating episodes of the pragmatists in action, such as the Hetty Robinson inheritance case, in which Peirce and his father served as expert witnesses and used ingenious statistical analyses of handwriting to prove that Robinson had forged her aunt's signature. Menand's rendition of William James's college expedition to the Amazon with the Harvard naturalist Louis Agassiz reveals a source of James's ambivalence about science (Agassiz was a scrupulous specimen collector, but an equivocating theorist). Peirce's captious attitude toward colleagues—some of whom, Menand shows, conspired to blackball him from academia—contrasted with his faith in the community of inquirers. The stories are fluid and readable, and Menand has a knack for selecting the illustrative event, the tic of character. He reconstructs tense political settings with judicious balance, and he handles straightforwardly the unsavory details of the pragmatists' lives, such as Peirce's womanizing.

The method is collective biography. Menand tracks thinkers through the decisive occasions of post-Civil War intellectual life as they struggle to "find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life." Whereas neopragmatist interpretation invoked James and Dewey as the originators of a few handy formulae, Menand populates their social world and fleshes out their professional identities, adding Peirce, Holmes, and a host of subordinates to the drama. His characters are philosophers whose writings often slip into the hypertechnical details of logic and the laboratory, but Menand has his eye on the human scene. The old pragmatists pondered recondite questions of epistemology, such as what makes an inductive inference compelling; Menand turns their thoughts to less abstract questions, such as how to develop an elementary school curriculum. Pragmatists devoted tracts to statistical methods, sensory experiments, and theories of inquiry, but Menand manages to broach the subjects through quirky, effective tales such as Adolphe Quetelet's computation of murder rates in France, the skull collection of the anthropologist Samuel George Morton, and the ambivalence of Holmes's war comrade Henry Abbott, foe of emancipation but valiant Union soldier. What might have been a dry cerebral history ends up as a gripping cluster of edifying experiences, accessible to lay readers.

But popularization has its costs. However engaging the narrative of people and politics, this book purports to be a story of ideas. What ties these men together is not their life experiences, Menand says, but a single belief: "They all believed that ideas are not 'out there' waiting to be discovered, but are tools." Menand affirms that ideas are "always soaked through" with circumstance, and so he relates the social and political climate that spawned them. The story will be complete, one assumes, when it probes the experiences of James, et al., and yields ideas of rich meaning and wide applicability. But Menand preempts this conclusion. At

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precisely the point when the story moves from experience to idea, Menand stops being a historian and turns into a neopragmatist. The anecdotes cease, and the prose slips into a sequence of inert quasi-philosophical pronouncements. For him, ideas are the simplest of things. He says that the pragmatists "believed that ideas do not develop according to some inner logic of their own, but are entirely dependent, like germs, on their human carriers and the environment." Later: "An idea has no greater metaphysical stature than, say, a fork," "Darwin's ideas are devices for generating data." Menand neither doubts these opinions nor explores how ideas differ from germs and forks. The only truth-value one has is a situational one—here it is true, there it is not. To posit otherwise is to grant ideas a "greater metaphysical stature." This reduction divides *The Metaphysical Club* in two. In one part, we have a lively social saga of the old pragmatists; in the other, an overlay of facile summaries. Characters receive a history, but their ideas are left dangling. If there is any complexity in beliefs, Menand thinks, it rests in why people choose this idea over that one—an experiential or psychological question, not a substantive intellectual one. This explains why *The Metaphysical Club* is long on biography and short on concepts. Menand devotes large sections of his book to the pragmatists' experience in class, in battle, and in court. But when we reach their ideas, all we find are stock simplicities and bare assertions. As Menand rises from narrative to ideas, a glib reductiveness takes over:

> The lesson that Holmes learned from the war can be put in a sentence. It is that certitude leads to violence.
>
> The key to Holmes's civil liberties opinions is the key to all his jurisprudence: it is that he thought only in terms of aggregate social forces; he had no concern for the individual.
>
> This [the idea of community] was the conviction at the bottom of all Peirce's thought.
>
> Everything James and Dewey wrote as pragmatists boils down to a single claim: people are the agents of their own destinies.

And so on. The key, the lesson, the question, the conviction—this is where Menand arrives once he "un-soaks" ideas of circumstances. Holmes and the others meander through a maze of universities, clubs, expeditions, strikes, and wars, bounce off troublesome mentors and adversaries, but their ideas remained, if we are to believe Menand, crystal clear and unproblematic. Rarely does he examine the complex make-up of ideas or the conceptual problems they generate. When he does recount how an idea inspired someone, the inspiration is due to the environment of the recipient. When he articulates ideas, he neglects analysis for the sake of quips. What does it mean, for example, to say that "William James invented pragmatism as a favor to Charles Peirce"? Six pages later Menand tells us that "James invented pragmatism . . . in order to defend religious belief in what he regarded as an excessively scientistic and materialistic age," while early on in the book he writes of "the conception of a closed universe . . . that William James designed pragmatism specifically to subvert." Defend or subvert: Which is it?

Sometimes Menand's quips lapse into cuteness, as in this favored pattern:

> [W]hat these four thinkers had in common was not a group of ideas, but a single idea—an idea about ideas.
>
> This is not because he changed those views. It is because he changed his view of the nature of views.
>
> Addams and Dewey got into an argument. It was an argument about argument.

At other times he prefers the casual metaphor: "culture is a Rubik's Cube of possibilities" and "In the midst of this mutilation and mayhem, Holmes did an extraordinary thing: he road-tested his beliefs." The rhetoric suggests that Menand doesn't take his material all that seriously. Holmes's "thing"

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occurred the night he lay in a hospital cot after the Battle of Ball's Bluff, surrounded by severed limbs and expecting to die from a bullet wound just above his heart. Is it apt to term his midnight ruminations on death and duty a "road-test"? The trope trivializes the experience.

Menand's procedure is more than a stylistic habit—it is an epistemological principle. The facile phrases serve an anti-metaphysical—indeed, an intellectual—function, dragging ideas back to earth whenever they threaten to take on a life of their own. Menand is so concerned to ward off theories of mind that posit ideas as representations of reality that he reduces intellection to a sociological reflex. For most people, truth and justice are lofty things best pursued disinterestedly. But for Menand, "making those kinds of decisions—about what is right or what is truthful—is like deciding what to order in a restaurant." To distinguish between judging what is right and selecting an entrée, apparently, would be to venture outside the world of real human action.

It is with such pat maxims that Menand ends his analysis. Since Rorty defined pragmatism as "a thorough-going abandonment of the notion of discovering the truth," Menand feels he need go no further. But for the pragmatists themselves, the catchphrases they sounded were beginnings, not ends. William James composed neat transformative adages—"'the true' is only the expedient in the way of our thinking"—but he used them to reorient abiding questions such as the place of God in the universe, not to close them. The pragmatists regarded ideas as complex, potent creations that provide judgments, interpretations, and laws, as well as pain or relief. This is one reason Peirce intended pragmatism as "a method for the analysis of concepts," and James and Dewey spent so many years responding to critics who had misconstrued their ideas. For Menand, the pragmatic turn sends us back to the details of experience, but for the pragmatists the turn threw them into spirited debates about truth, faith, and reality, things which Menand downplays. He believes that ideas are implements, that the mind is an adaptive mechanism, and that reality is a pragmatic construct. Period. When philosophers accused James, Dewey, and F. C. S. Schiller of believing the same, they replied in scholarly journals with lengthy, nuanced restatements. When colleagues interpreted pragmatism as antirealism, Dewey countered with an essay on "The Realism of Pragmatism," which proclaimed: "Speaking only for myself, the presuppositions and tendencies of pragmatism are distinctly realistic." James's response to the antirealist charge began, "It is difficult to excuse such a parody of the pragmatist's opinion."

This doesn't mean that the pragmatists were realists and that Menand's constructionist characterization is wrong. What it shows is their recognition that the mind-reality issue was more complicated than their pithier formulations implied. Menand admits that pragmatism was "contested in its own time, and [is] contested today," but he is disinclined to join the contest, claiming he is writing an "historical interpretation," not a "philosophical argument." This is a hedge, a way of forwarding ideas as right opinion without having to support them or to respect their contraries. Menand savors the aphorism—"Human beings produce culture in the same sense that they produce carbon dioxide"—and lets it stand.

For him, ideas are now pedestrian things, easily fitted to historical narratives. Holmes's observation of soldierly discipline in battle taught him a pragmatic lesson: "to admire success more than purity of faith." When did James first conceive "relational thinking"? On his trip to Brazil, when he witnessed the urbane civility of the exotic-looking natives. It is easy to explain ideas by their biographical origins. But Peirce endowed ideas with the power to convert doubt into belief, annoyance into comfort, while James remarked that wrong ideas can kill us, right ones can save us. Menand recognizes that power—and tames it. He

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returns all questions to the realm of circumstance, where complexities may be narrated as personal conflicts. The result is an entertaining but superficial exercise in intellectual history, one in which ideas are wheeled on not because of their substance or truth value but because of their anecdotal force.

Past divertissement

Roger Hudson, editor,
The Lyttleton Hart-Davis Letters:
A Selection.
The Akadine Press, 384 pages, $35

Brown Craig Brown, editor,
The Marsh Marlowe Letters.
The Akadine Press, 152 pages, $13.95

reviewed by Ben Downing

Who says we should never complain? Consider the following. In October 1955 George Lyttleton, a retired Eton master, then seventy-two, was dining with, among others, his former student, the distinguished publisher and man of letters Rupert Hart-Davis. When Lyttleton grumbled that nobody wrote to him anymore, Hart-Davis gallantly promised to do so. Five days later he made good on the pledge; Lyttleton responded; and thus was launched, by a stray bleat of self-pity, a weekly correspondence that, when it ended with Lyttleton's death in 1962, had generated about six hundred of the most delightful letters in English. These, edited by Hart-Davis, were published between 1978 and 1984, but the six volumes have since gone out of print. This selection is therefore overdue and more than welcome.

The main currency of exchange here is, not surprisingly, literary chatter. Although the two men share many tastes—both revere Carlyle and Beerbohm ("He was the perfect *petit maître* . . . adorning all he touched," Hart-Davis sighs upon Sir Max's death in 1956)—they also play off each other. For his part, Lyttleton assumes the role of rusticated codger, "full of Victorian prejudice." "In ten years' time," he predicts, "I shall be left high and dry by modern literature, and in writing to me you will feel you have joined the spiritualists and are communicating with a ghost." Counters Hart-Davis: "Your fear of senectitude and hardening of the literary arteries seems to me morbid." Lyttleton lovingly tends his herd of *bêtes noires,* doting especially on D. H. Lawrence, F. R. Leavis (sometimes referred to as "the man L—v-s"), and, regrettably, like Mark Twain, "the woman Austen." In response, Hart-Davis teases him for his masochistic persistence in reading writers he dislikes. Yet Lyttleton isn't all crotchets; he also produces some cracking anecdotes:

> Old Maugham, talking to a girls' school about the art of writing short stories, told them that the essential ingredients were religion, sex, mystery, high rank, non-literary language, and brevity. The schoolmistress next day told her young charges to try their hand at one according to this recipe. After a minute one raised her hand and said she had finished. The incredulous mistress told her to read it out, and she did: 'My God!', said the duchess, 'I'm pregnant. I wonder who done it'.

Meanwhile Hart-Davis, in city pent, reports on the latest hurly-burly:

> I asked J.B.P. [Priestley] about his unhappy trip to Australia, where he clearly put the natives' backs up, as he inevitably does wherever he goes. 'What did you say to upset them?' I asked. 'Nothing at all', says he—and then, after a pause, 'I did say that their big cities reminded me of Wolverhampton after a long dry spell—but nothing else'.

Having taken upon himself the Herculean task of editing Oscar Wilde's letters, Hart-Davis also provides for Lyttleton a running account of the attendant thrills and irritations. "Vyvyan Holland [Wilde's son] is trying to make me bowdlerise Oscar's let-

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ters," he groans at one point, and at another pillories an "incredibly addle-witted society woman" who in her memoirs had printed four Wilde letters:

> Mrs. Beddington seemed to think that to have received a letter from Oscar would brand anyone as a pervert down the ages. I told her I had letters to 250 men and women, including Browning, Gladstone, Matthew Arnold, Irving, Ellen Terry, Whistler, Bernard Shaw, Ruskin etc etc, and she really couldn't think them *all* queer.

By no means, however, does the correspondence entirely consist of bookish banter; what Hart-Davis says of Lyttleton's letters, that they are "interspersed with so much else of shrewd comment on men and things," holds equally true for his own. Some of this material—the talk of cricket, and of the quaint foibles of dons and beaks; the potshots at Winchester ("A common Wykehamist trait," snipes Lyttleton, "is to suspect the sincerity of all non-Wykehamists")—will appeal only to diehard Anglophiles. But most is of broader interest, and the pair can be counted on for amusing, cant-free observations about everything from religion and politics to food—"Do you agree," Lyttleton asks, "with [George Saintsbury's] dictum that whenever you are offered fried sole, whatever may be the alternatives, fried sole should be your choice?"—and even health. Thus Lyttleton again:

> I have a pain in the chest—probably some form of dyspepsia. My family cheerfully suggest angina pectoris. How scored off they would feel if they turned out right! Was it not Walter de la Mare who said what splendid names for heroine and villain Lady Angina Pectoris and Sir Rheumatoid Arthritis would be?

Nor is sardonic humor the only note struck here, for real intimacy springs up between the two men. In the letters' most startling moment, Hart-Davis, braced for opprobrium, comes clean to Lyttleton about his sexless marriage and love for another woman. To the former's surprise, Lyttleton, elsewhere so prudish as to approve the *Chatterley* ban, expresses complete sympathy and is soon a valued confidant. For Lyttleton himself the rewards are richer still: the correspondence becomes a lifeline of sorts, Hart-Davis's trusty dispatch the bright spot in his week. All of which makes the whole affair quite moving and—in balance with the rumpled erudition and offhand wit—elevates it past divertissement to the dignity of what we might call, to Lyttleton's and Hart-Davis's certain horror, something not unlike art.

That *The Lyttleton Hart-Davis Letters* are ripe for parody would never have occurred to me, but such proves to be the case. *The Marsh Marlowe Letters*, originally published in 1984, is a wicked spoof by the humorist Craig Brown, here operating under a facetious editorial pseudonym. With his keen eye for affect, Brown pounces on all the Etonians' plummy little mannerisms: their clubbiness, mutual flattery, pedantic allusions, gratuitous Gallicisms, and Latin tags flaunted like designer labels. "*Entre nous*," purrs Gerald Marsh (Brown's caricature of Lyttleton), "which method do you employ for blowing your nose?" Replies Harvey Marlowe: "I blow my nose with a handkerchief. *Et toi*?" Concurs Marsh: "I, too, swear by the humble handkerchief: heaven forfend that I ever contemplate the usage of another. How eminently civilised we both are!" And so on. Whether Brown is motivated more by malice or affection I find curiously hard to judge. Regardless, *The Marsh Marlowe Letters*, like any good satire, at once deflates and enshrines its object.

Both these books are available from the superbly discerning mail-order outfit A Common Reader,[1] whose catalogs make better reading than most publishers' lists and whose spirit of genial belles-lettres is

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substantially the same one exemplified by those two dear fossils, George Lyttleton and Rupert Hart-Davis.

Our spiritual legacy

Jeffrey Hart Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe: Toward the Revival of Higher Education. Yale University Press, 261 pages, $26.95

reviewed by Hilton Kramer

To grasp the purpose and scope of Jeffrey Hart's new book, which is designed to serve as a refresher course in a close reading of the ideas to be found in the literary classics that have shaped the intellectual and spiritual character of Western culture, it will be useful to turn first to the author's afterword. For while the main body of the text in *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* makes only passing reference to the "catastrophe" alluded to in its title, the afterword succinctly summarizes the nature of the political assault on the humanities that has prompted Mr. Hart's own spirited defense of the Western canon in this book.

"Needless to say," he writes, "the villain [in this assault] always turns out to be variously white, male, Western, racist, imperialist, sexist, or homophobic—or, with luck, all of them together." Of the so-called "multicultural" imperative that is central to the assault, he correctly observes that it is

> an ideological academic fantasy maintained in obvious bad faith. It really amounts to a form of anti-Westernism. That is, all cultures are to be respected and valued except the civilization of the West, to which, not surprisingly, the actual inhabitants of those other cultures are trying to migrate in large numbers.

It is Mr. Hart's optimistic belief that the cultural catastrophe that has resulted from this assault is now, as he says, "coming to an end, though with agonizing slowness." In the face of the anti-Western bias that has now been codified in significant segments of the academy, the media, the arts, and the entertainment industry, opinion will inevitably differ about an impending "end" to the *Kulturkampf* that has been raging now, with devastating consequences, for a quarter of a century. But that is a disagreement about the future, not about the tremendous losses we have suffered in the recent past.

It is in the hope of reversing these losses and recovering a true understanding of the West as a civilization that Mr. Hart has written this engaging survey of its essential texts and tenets, and done so with a clarity, conviction, and élan that give the entire exposition a primer-like authority. This is a book that the parents of all college-age students ought to equip them with as a defense against the ideological blather they are likely to encounter in their classes. Parents, too, would do well to pay the book close attention as a measure of what their kids are getting—or not getting—from their expensive and often wasteful classroom instruction. *Smiling Through the Cultural Catastrophe* is, in this respect, a reliable consumers' guide to what is really meant by a liberal education.

Appropriately, Mr. Hart begins his account of what he calls "the narrative of Western civilization" with a close look at both the *Iliad* and the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. "So far as the chronology is concerned," he writes, "we could start the narrative of Western civilization either with Homer's epics or with the Hebrew Bible. They are the primary documents." It is thus in Athens and Jerusalem, the subject of Mr. Hart's first chapter, that the fundamental dialectic—or, if you like, the fundamental tensions—of Western civilization is found to have been firmly established.

Readers familiar with the discussion of Hebraism and Hellenism in Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) will readily recognize the genealogy of the argument, and Mr. Hart is quick to disclaim any originality on this score. "The Athens-Jerusalem paradigm is not exactly a

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commonplace, and certainly not one in the discussion of literature," he writes,

> but enough philosophers have argued for its centrality to have made this a kind of consensus. Whatever their differences in detail, such philosophers recognize that Athens and Jerusalem amount to a dialectic, and that the consequences of their interaction have been decisive for the character of Western civilization, setting it off from other cultures and civilizations both past and present.

Yet he is right to remind us that today this consensus is "not part of the intellectual equipment of the educated reader, and neither professors nor their students appear to be aware of its dynamic significance or its presence in the important books we will be discussing here, beginning with the *Iliad* and Exodus, fundamental works for Athens and Jerusalem." (These other works range from Plato's *Symposium*, the New Testament, Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*.) "Indeed, with very few exceptions," writes Mr. Hart, "these and many other works to be discussed here are but residually present today, if at all, even to professors of the liberal arts."

What, then, do Athens and Jerusalem signify as distinct ways of looking at the world? In Mr. Hart's characterization,

> they are metaphors referring to philosophy/science and to the disciplined insights of scripture. The philosopher begins like Socrates by saying "I know nothing" and pursues knowledge through an investigation of the world. The scriptural tradition bases its view of the world on a series of received insights into the constitution of actuality.

Matthew Arnold, addressing readers who could more confidently be expected to have a close familiarity with both the Bible and the Greek classics, stated the matter somewhat differently. "The final aim of both Hellenism and Hebraism, as of all great spiritual disciplines," he wrote in *Culture and Anarchy*, "is no doubt the same: man's perfection or salvation." He then made the following distinctions:

> At the bottom of both the Greek and the Hebrew notion is the desire, native in man, for reason, and the will of God, the feeling after the universal order,—in a word, the love of God. But, while Hebraism seizes upon certain plain, capital intimations of the universal order, and rivets itself, one may say, with unequalled grandeur of earnestness and intensity on the study and observance of them, the bent of Hellenism is to follow, with flexible activity, the whole play of the universal order, to be apprehensive of missing any part of it, of sacrificing one part to another, to slip away from resting in this or that intimation of it, however capital. An unclouded clearness of mind, an unimpeded play of thought, is what this bent drives at. The governing idea of Hellenism is *spontaneity of consciousness*; that of Hebraism, *strictness of conscience*.

Exactly how this divided spiritual legacy has been reflected in, modified by, and otherwise morally debated and transformed in the classic works of Western literature is Mr. Hart's great subject here, and to its revival as the basis of a liberal education he has made an impressive contribution. He brings to the task both a long history as a teacher in the classroom—mainly as a professor of English at Dartmouth College—and as an editor and writer in the larger arena of public debate—mainly as senior editor of *National Review*. His principal method throughout is the traditional one of *explication de texte*, which he commands with an exemplary fluency and imaginative sympathy. (His brilliant discussion of *The Great Gatsby*, for one example, is the best I have ever read.) I am not myself as optimistic about a revival of liberal education as Mr. Hart may be, but there can be little doubt that if such a revival were to be seen anytime soon, it will be accomplished along the lines laid out in this book.

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Notebook

Philosophers as radicals

by Charles L. Griswold, Jr.

The association between philosophy and radicalism is an ancient one and in some ways a natural one. Philosophy is in one sense an intrinsically revolutionary activity, simply because its goal is to put received authority into question. Its interrogatory approach—or, as philosophy's victims say, its methods of interrogation—and its adherence to the standards dictated by the bar of reason quickly ride roughshod over the sensibilities and sentiments of the day. And, of course, philosophers sometimes offer detailed emendations of received authority, describing what a state of affairs based on reason would look like.

Plato's *Republic* supplies the model in the Western tradition, but any truly philosophical tradition is bound to offer similar paradigms. We automatically characterize resistance to philosophy's needling questions as mere prejudice, close-mindedness, and irrationality. We do this because we are products of a tradition of liberalism that is inspired by a vision of the political and moral beneficence of philosophical questioning. Naturally, this vision has itself been decisively influenced by philosophers, indeed by classically trained philosophers (John Stuart Mill springs to mind).

We are no doubt the beneficiaries of this tradition of unbridled philosophical investigation even when in some particular cases we are its immediate victims. But is our occasional resistance to and indeed skepticism about philosophy's demands for rational answers to its questions altogether irrational?

The period of American history that produced many of today's middle-aged professionals—academics included, of course—certainly encouraged an affirmative answer to this question. Our college or university years were characterized in part by a systematic rejection of received authority. We radicals viewed ourselves as acting in the name of reason when eradicating, root and branch, every bit of received authority we could lay our hands on. You will certainly recollect many examples from the late 1960s and early 1970s in particular. I attended Trinity College in Connecticut and remember well how our philosophical radicalism manifested itself. I was a proud philosophy major, but the attitude that I am calling philosophical radicalism was very widespread among all "freethinkers." Its amazingly influential effects are by now woven into the structures of contemporary American academic life, and the attitude that created them continues to be revered.

The story is a familiar one even where the details vary. By 1969 nearly all course requirements at Trinity College had either been abolished or were ignored in practice; requirements for majors were to a large extent negotiable; the fraternities had either shut down or were transformed into little more than dormitories. The intervention of administrators in the lives of faculty, and of both in the lives of students, was at a bare

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minimum; the doctrine of *in loco parentis* was thoroughly and energetically suppressed; compulsory attendance at just about any college event (such as Sunday morning chapel) had been abolished; participation at most voluntary events (such as the traditional football matches with Wesleyan) were poor and the time-honored rituals associated with them largely forgotten. Dress codes (some formal, some informal) were gone. Students gained representation on a number of college committees (many of them ad hoc in nature); entire new programs (such as the "open semester" and independent study programs), new majors (such as theater and dance, comparative literature, non-Western studies, urban and environmental studies, American studies), and new methodologies and texts were introduced. Some dorms became co-ed, as, of course, did many of the dorm rooms.

Some of these changes came about through rather active student involvement—nothing of the scale or violence that occurred at Columbia and Cornell, but remarkable nonetheless. For example, members of TAN (the Trinity Association of Negroes) and the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) boasted that, thanks to their leadership, the first college president's office to be forcibly occupied was at Trinity (the event occurred in 1968). A "sit-in" of that sort would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. Some 168 students participated, and represented a cross-section of the student body (as well as of all four undergraduate classes).

The atmosphere of disdain for the way things had stood in the college was itself just an extension of the deep and widespread revulsion on the part of the young for "the establishment"—that loose nexus of customs, institutions, attitudes, and norms, that constitute the way things are. The results were felt in many ways. The authority of elders—of one's parents—was questioned and often rejected, and their assumptions about what constituted a fulfilled life (the proverbial life in the suburbs, two-car garage, gaggle of children, climbing the corporate ladder, etc.) were mocked frequently. The long hair, disheveled clothes, and propensity for nudity whenever possible represented clear rejections of the world of our parents. The so-called "sexual revolution" exhibited to an extraordinary degree the extent to which deeply established norms and expectations had been overturned. Such things as cohabitation before marriage rapidly became the norm, the definition of the "family" was questioned, homosexuality began to be accepted. Abortion became much more easily available.

In the equally defining sphere of religious worship, we saw an explosion of interest in non-Western religions, enormous skepticism about standing institutional religion of almost every stripe, and a general dissolution, or at least redefining, of religious ceremonies and their place in daily life. It goes without saying that thanks in part to the anger about the Vietnam War, and to President Nixon's conduct, established political institutions of all sorts were widely reviled and mocked. This included the armed services, all branches of the government, as well as corporations (recast as oppressive multinational criminal outfits).

Like many of my fellows, I showed my disregard for the authority of custom by skipping my own graduation ceremony. And I recall one evening—on the Spring day in 1970 that Richard Nixon ordered the "incursion" into Cambodia, as I recall—when a large number of infuriated students spontaneously marched on a symbol of the power structure, *viz* our college president's house. They woke the poor fellow up, demanded that he appear at his front door—which he did, tired and disheveled—and that he justify Nixon's action and explain what he intended to do in response to it. I dimly recall his standing on his stoop, trying to explain above the hoots that he really wasn't in charge of the conduct of the Vietnam War. It is with a sense of shame that I confess to standing on the edge of the crowd but not protesting the protesters' incivility and stupidity. I am quite sure this

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was not the only time the college's president was thus awakened.

Not all of our philosophical radicalism was uncivil and misguided. The fact is that many aspects of "the establishment," including the college, were in need of serious criticism and emendation. Some of the student protests were directed at breaking down what appeared to some as the college's indifference to the racial diversity of its student body and faculty (even though during the 1970–71 academic year, the percentage of minority students at Trinity stood at about 6.8 percent of the student body). Women had been admitted for the first time in 1969; their numbers were, of course, far from what they are now. The inclusion of art forms such as classical and modern dance in the curriculum was long overdue. And some extraordinarily fruitful, if risky, educational experiments were attempted. I owe my induction into philosophy to one of them. Indeed, the experiment in question (an "open semester" program) prevented me from taking at least a year's leave from college—and others from dropping out altogether. The graduates of that experimental program have gone on to successful careers, several in philosophy. It is inconceivable that an experimental program of this sort could be implemented now.

That said, several deep and mistaken assumptions underlay the thoroughly dismissive attitude toward received institutions, mores, and ceremonies. I do not have in mind the usual complaint about laxness of morals, but something else that is not easy to articulate concisely. The difficulty of articulating these mistaken assumptions concisely reflects something important about them, for it is in good part through experience that their character is revealed—and this is something that usually requires time to accumulate. This is why the sorts of mistakes I have in mind are bound to be repeated by those young in age or spirit.

Let me put the main point this way. At least some of us behaved like Enlightenment *philosophes*, just the sort of thinkers Edmund Burke feared (though his fear reduced him to quietism). The general assumption was that something that cannot be justified before the bar of reason has no validity. Nothing that is, just because it is and has been, commands your assent; only that which you could rationally justify commands assent. Tradition is prejudice until validated by philosophy. What Burke called the "common cake of custom" is stale at best and poisoned at worst, for it is likely layered with all sorts of unexamined assumptions and accumulated errors and ignorance. Custom, tradition, mores are in themselves like blind but powerful forces that impose themselves on society but should be resisted or skeptically reviewed. Unless supervised by reason, their function can only be destructive, whether straightforwardly by authorizing immoral practices, or indirectly by tranquilizing their adherents such that they are incapable of independent thought. The liberal tradition of freethinking—praised by so many Enlightenment figures and seemingly embodied by that paradigm of all freethinkers, Socrates—was for some of us the animating spirit behind the disregard of received tradition.

Was not our hero Socrates, after all, the fellow who proclaimed publicly that the "unexamined life is not worth living"—thereby implying that the lives of most of his countrymen were worthless? Did he not look and dress and live oddly, in near complete disregard of the mores of his time? Did he not believe in strange divinities—the hitherto unheard of "Ideas," or "Forms"? And did he not propose as an ideal utopia a hitherto untried city-state ruled by philosophers, that is, by men and women who would exercise naked together but feel no erotic attraction, thanks to their being so completely governed by reason? None of us mistook himself for Socrates, or even a French *philosophe*. My point is that the skeptical intellectual attitude of the sort frequently attributed to Socrates easily serves as a basis for the dismissal of tradition. Like other freethinkers, he seemed to tell us that we should take our bearings not by con-

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vention, but by nature, not by *nomos* but by *physis*.

That sort of attitude rests on several mistakes. First, in opposing nature to convention so severely, and recommending only the former as a reliable basis for knowledge and action, it suggests that we can live according to nature outside of convention. But that is an illusion, as was obvious from the fact that our own philosophical radicalism was possible only from within various conventions—e.g., that of academic philosophy in an academic institution dependent on complex academic, political, economic, and cultural arrangements.

Second, the attitude of the freethinkers disregarded the fact that stability in conventions is precarious, and they were largely ignorant of the price of instability (as the flippant talk of "revolution" suggested). They were ignorant, too, of the difficulty of creating even moderately reliable conventions, as well as of the terrifying ease and quickness with which conventions and institutions can be undone. I myself did not fully understand the last of these points until I later saw Howard University, where I was privileged to teach for over a decade, deconstruct itself before my eyes. In a short few months, decades of work by honorable men and women was undone. The evils of strife, faction, and dissolution are easy to overlook, I fear, by those who have not experienced them, just as it is easy for the inexperienced to underestimate the extraordinary difficulties involved in helping worthy conventions and institutions to thrive.

Further, we "revolutionaries" failed to understand that when institutions are not wisely structured, the intellectual brilliance of the individuals who depend on them does not in itself guarantee that social life will be governed by reason. As James Madison put it in *The Federalist Papers* 55 (C. Rossiter edition), commenting on the defective structure of Greek political institutions,

> In all very numerous assemblies, of whatever characters composed, passion never fails to wrest the scepter from reason. Had every Athenian citizen been a Socrates, every Athenian assembly would still have been a mob.

It must also be said that our enthusiastic "Socratic" attitude showed little understanding of the sense in which rituals—such as the graduation ceremonies that I unceremoniously skipped—are crucial to the flourishing of conventions. Rituals mold as well as express moral sentiments that, at least in the case of some universities, deserve praise; these include such things as admiration of achievement, gratitude toward those who made it possible, and appreciation for the institution whose existence is the prerequisite for the collaborative striving for excellence.

In sum, the life-sustaining value of the moral sentiments is often discounted in the eyes of philosophic reason. Consider the sentiment of loyalty, whether expressed toward a university or one's nation: it is essential to the survival of any institution, particularly towards those we would want to see prosper. Madison notes in *Federalist* 49 that without such veneration, "the wisest and freest governments would not possess the requisite stability." This was a veneration common in the World War II generation of my parents, but severely thinned out in the Vietnam War generation, as is symbolically evident in the difference between John F. Kennedy's genuine patriotism and Bill Clinton's evasions. After noting the importance of political veneration to stability, Madison goes on to note that

> If it be true that all governments rest on opinion, it is no less true that the strength of opinion in each individual, and its practical influence on conduct, depend much on the number which he supposes to have entertained the same opinion. The reason of man, like man himself, is timid and cautious when left alone, and acquires firmness and confidence in proportion to the number with which it is associated. When the examples that fortify opinion are ancient as well as numer-

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> ous, they are known to have a double effect. In a nation of philosophers this consideration ought to be disregarded. A reverence for the laws would be sufficiently inculcated by the voice of an enlightened reason. But a nation of philosophers is as little to be expected as the philosophical race of kings wished for by Plato. And in every other nation the most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side.

That is, moral sentiments are necessary not just because they support stability, but because the philosopher's replacement for the sentiments—namely, the rule of philosophical reason—is not widely enough available.

This brings me to a last and most complicated objection to the *hauteur* of the *philosophes*. The settled opinions of a culture, supported by the moral sentiments, and expressed in conventions of various sorts, may embody a wisdom that philosophic reason cannot replace. That cognitive value consists, as David Hume argued, in its being a repository of the insights and lessons learned from experience and from trial and error over time. It is remarkable but not fortuitous that Hume is quoted to this general effect in the concluding paragraph of *The Federalist Papers*. Thus the institution of marriage, to take another example, may represent the settled recognition of the value of such things as the commitment to one person over time, the family as the proper context for the raising of children and for their moral education, and so forth.

It will be objected, of course, that the settled opinions and customs of a culture frequently embody ignorance and mistakes, if not injustices. If Burkean quietism is the alternative to Platonic radicalism, is not the latter the better bet? A good question: the best response is to develop a theory as to how critical assessment is to be meshed, at cognitive, moral, and political levels, with a wise appreciation of the importance of tradition. Philosophy has a great deal of good work to do.[1]

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1 I have taken a stab at developing some of the themes alluded to in this paragraph in my *Adam Smith and the Virtues of Enlightenment* (1999).

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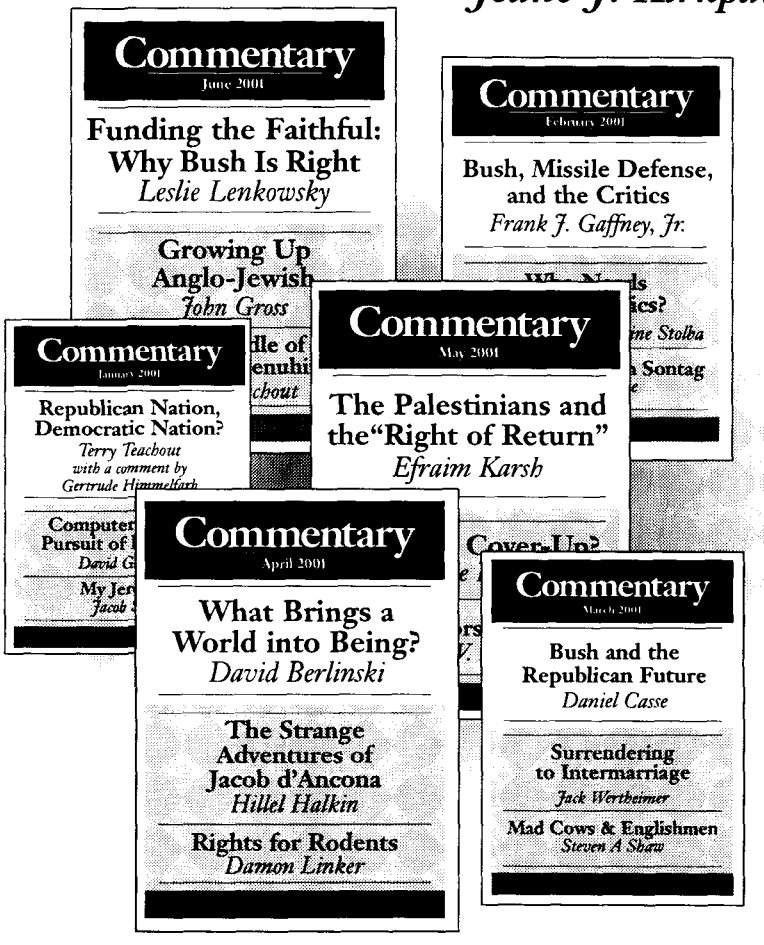

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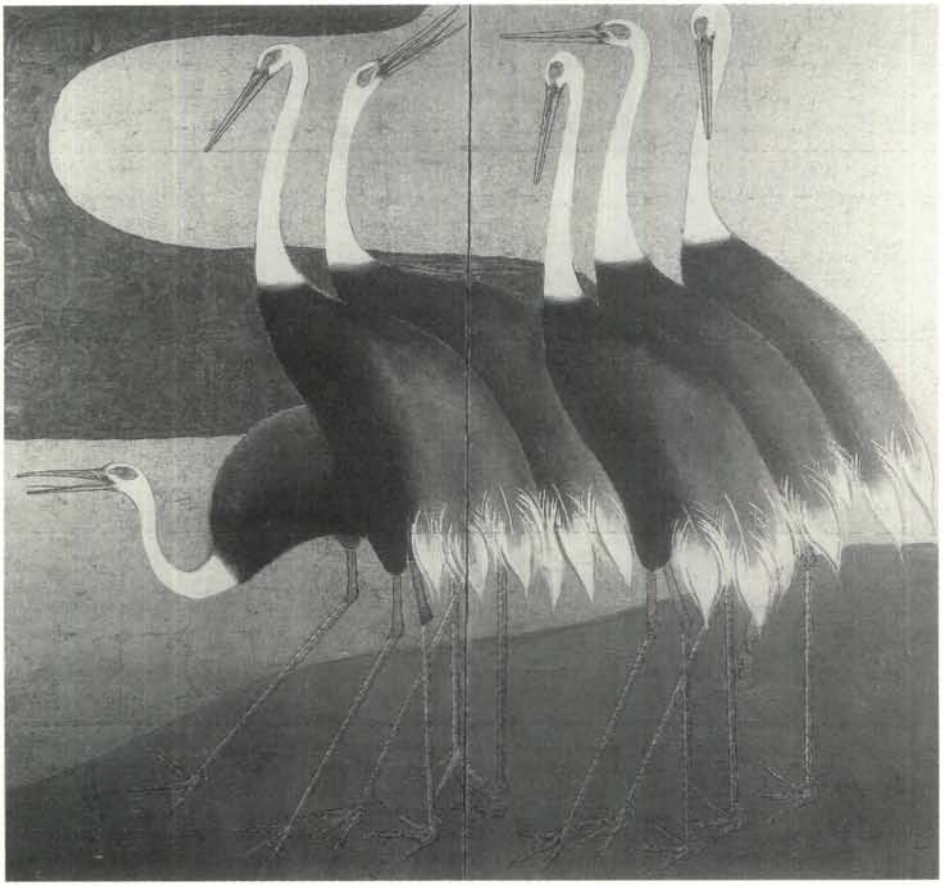

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